

**THE AFTERLIFE OF THE VICTORIAN MARRIAGE PLOT IN  
NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION**



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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

### The Afterlife of the Victorian Marriage Plot in Neo-Victorian Fiction

The neo-Victorian novel is known for exposing the hidden sex lives of what Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964) and, following him, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1984) describe as the “Other Victorians”, those marginal and sexually transgressive figures who now populate its pages. However, this has led to the neo-Victorian novel being criticised for its reconstruction of nineteenth-century history into a sexually explicit narrative for the enjoyment of a contemporary audience, or what Marie-Luise Kohle in “The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth-Century Erotic” refers to as “sexsation” (345). Neo-Victorian novels critically engage with the Victorian past and its narratives by employing either an historical, or partly historical setting. A number of recent novels which are not historical in their setting similarly respond to or engage with a particular Victorian novel or Victorian morals and values either explicitly or implicitly in this highly self-conscious, revisionary fashion. Examples of such novels are *Here on Earth* (1997) by Alice Hoffman, *On Chesil Beach* (2007) by Ian McEwan and *Re Jane* (2015) by Patricia Park. In this thesis, I undertake to read these novels as representative of a separate category of neo-Victorian fiction by focussing on the “afterlife” of the Victorian marriage plot in them, a term I take from John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff’s *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*.

## OPSOMMING

Neo-Victoriaanse literatuur is bekend daarvoor om die verborge sekslewe van diegene wie Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964) en, na hom, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1984) verwys na as “ander” Victoriane, daardie marginaliseerde en seksueel grensoorskynde figure nou volop in neo-Victoriaanse skryfkuns. Dit het egter daartoe gelei dat neo-Victoriaanse literatuur gekritiseer word vir die rekonstruksie van ‘n seksueel eksplisiete weergawe van negentiende-eeuse geskiedenis vir die genot van ‘n kontemporere gehoor, ‘n tendens wat Marie-Luise Kohle in “The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth-Century Erotic” verwys na as “sexsation” (345). Neo-Victoriaanse literatuur tree krities in gesprek met die Victoriaanse tydperk deur gebruik te maak van ‘n historiese of gedeeltelik-historiese agtergrond. Daar is wel ‘n aantal boeke onlangs gepubliseer wat nie histories van aard is nie maar steeds self-refleksief reageer op, of in gesprek tree met, ‘n spesifieke Victoriaanse boek of Victoriaanse ideologie, in ‘n eksplisiete of implisiete wyse. Voorbeelde van sulke literatuur is *Here on Earth* (1997) deur Alice Hoffman, *On Chesil Beach* (2007) deur Ian McEwan en *Re Jane* (2015) deur Patricia Park. In hierdie tesis onderneem ek om hierdie boeke te lees as verteenwoordigend van ‘n aparte kategorie neo-Victoriaanse fiksie deur te fokus op die “hiernamaals” van die Victoriaanse troutema, ‘n uitdrukking wat ek neem uit John Kucich en Dianne F. Sadoff se *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction:

#### The Marriage Plot in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction:

##### An Historical and Theoretical Overview

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The neo-Victorian novel, by establishing an intertextual dialogue between contemporary narratives and those from the nineteenth century, has succeeded in challenging Victorian ideas and ideologies that continue to shape the way people think about themselves and their sexual relationships. The marriage plot is central to the Victorian literary tradition and has performed a specific ideological function in the promotion of patriarchal gender roles that limited the middle-class female role to virtuous domesticity. Joseph Allan Boone explains that through a process that both “encode[s] and perpetuate[s]” (2) wedlock as a “natural, rather than socially constructed phenomenon” (6) and “necessity for the fully experienced life” (6), the marriage plot impelled Victorian middle-class women to take on a subservient role in marriage and, due to its enduring presence in popular culture, continues to do so today. The neo-Victorian novel subverts the Victorian novel’s sexist ideology that, as Boone observes, continues to “inhabit and inhibit the broader novelistic practices of the present day” (48). By foregrounding the voices of the marginalised, sexually transgressive figures that in traditional Victorian novels are condemned for not complying with the Victorian feminine ideal, classic neo-Victorian novels like John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and Sarah Waters’ lesbian bildungsroman *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) have presented its readers with an alternative female sexuality that does not conform to the heteronormative ideal of wife, mother and moral guide. What has become a convention of exposing in explicit detail the underside of Victorian prudery has, however, led to a critique of neo-Victorianism as historic fiction with a propensity for prurience. Traditionally, neo-Victorian novels are historical or partly historical, but there are a number of recent novels that, although doing away with the nineteenth-century setting, respond to, or engage with, a particular Victorian novel or Victorian mores and values, either explicitly or implicitly. *Here on Earth* (1997) by Alice Hoffman, *On Chesil Beach* (2007) by Ian McEwan and *Re Jane* (2015) by Patricia Park are examples of novels that grapple with this ghostly afterlife of the Victorian marriage plot that is maintained in contemporary

fiction and sensibilities from a twentieth- and twenty-first century context. Conscious of how the ideologies encapsulated in Victorian wedlock are resurrected in contemporary representations of love, sex and romance, these novels are not only what Boone identifies as “counter-traditional narratives” in the sense that they diverge from traditional Victorian novelistic conventions that end in a romantic denouement, but they also steer away from traditionally neo-Victorian conventions that emphasise transgressive Victorian sexuality (2). What I will emphasise in this thesis is that novels like these represent a particular category of neo-Victorian literature which engages in conversation with the Victorian past by being set entirely in a post-Victorian present.

### **Victorian Middle-Class Marriage and the Marriage Plot**

The conjugal ideal that underpins the marriage plot has origins in the Early Modern Period when, as Lawrence Stone explains, the shift from kinship ties to the privileging of companionate marriage, together with the growing influence of Christian Puritanism, changed the way people viewed themselves and their romantic relationships (123). Where previously identity was found in title and family name, it came to be understood that it was “right and proper” for the male individual to “pursue his own happiness” (Stone 258), an endeavour that, it was believed, was “best achieved by domestic affection” (Stone 268). This elevation of matrimony to what Stone describes as “the prime legitimate goal in life” (268), together with the church’s condemnation of sex outside the boundaries of marriage, had severe implications for the way female identity in particular would be constructed in the modern world (135). Prior to the seventeenth century, the primary objective of wedlock was the buttressing of economically beneficial relationships between aristocratic families and, although pre-marital chastity of rich female family members was used as a “bargaining chip in the marriage game, to be set off against male property and status rights” (Stone 636), “casual polygamy”, “easy divorce”, and “concubinage” among the primogeniture practising upper-classes were not out of the ordinary (Stone 30). However, by the seventeenth century a new model for love in the form of companionate marriage emerged among England’s rising social classes, which upheld mutual affection, opposed to economic alliance, as a more “respectable motive” for wedlock (Stone 284). At the same time, Ian Watt observes, a certain “narrowing of the ethical scale” occurred that redefined virtue in “primarily sexual terms”; words like “propriety, decency, modesty –and delicacy [...] came to have the almost exclusively sexual connotation which they have since very largely retained” (157). Female



sexual purity, as Watt explains, became the “basis for delineating [women in the rising social classes] from the so-assumed immoral aristocracy and uneducated poor” (Watt 160). This gave rise to what Nancy Armstrong describes as a “modern form of desire [...] that changed the criteria for determining what was most important in a female” (3). Armstrong explains that “of the female alone” it was presumed that “neither birth nor the accrument of title and status accurately represented the [female] individual; only the more subtle nuances of [virtuous] behaviour indicated what [she] was really worth” (4). These “subtle nuances” of behaviour, pre-Victorian authors believed, did not belong to a specific class of women, but it was assumed that with the correct education any women could become what affluent men most desired in a wife (Armstrong 57).

The novel played an important part in the cultural production of this virtuous feminine ideal. With courtship and marriage as a central theme, the novel, as Armstrong explains, simultaneously “delight[ed] its female readership, and “instruct[ed]” (107) them on the proper conduct necessary to obtain a prosperous marriage, a process of “gendering subjectivity” that during the nineteenth century would acquire the “immense political influence it still exercises today” (20). Its new-found role of pedagogical reading material contrasted sharply with its earlier history when, as Watt points out, the novel was “widely regarded as a typical example of a debased kind of writing” that displayed the unsavoury underbelly of English culture (54). Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) is perhaps the best known example of such texts and its full title – *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders: Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu’d Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve years a Whore, five Times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve years a Thief, Eight Years a Transported Felon in Virginia, and last grew Rich, liv’d Honest, and died a Penitent; Written from her own Memorandums* – gives some insight of the early novel’s “semi-pornographic” content (Armstrong 96). However, Samuel Richardson irrevocably changed the novel’s fate when he used novelistic form to narrate *Pamela* (1740), the tale of a chaste working-class woman who, harassed by her master, resists his sexual advances but marries him later and lives out the rest of her days in idyllic matrimonial bliss as the mistress of the house in which she previously worked as a servant (Watt 154). Although this Cinderella-like courtship tale initially caused great scandal, especially for its disregard of class differences, *Pamela* became hugely influential for its message that by female virtue alone, social and class roles could be overthrown

(Watt 154). What followed was a proliferation of newly re-invented “polite novels” which, cleared of eroticism and deemed as the only fiction truly suitable for an “impressionable readership” (Armstrong 97), criticised marriage for economic reasons, whilst supporting companionate marriage as the social ideal (Armstrong 61). In addition, these “polite novels” promoted a new set of deeply conservative gender constructs – as exemplified by heroines like Pamela, who is “very young, very inexperienced, [...] delicate in physical and mental constitution [...] essentially passive [and] devoid of any [sexual feelings]” – on which female sexuality and sexual behaviour in modern English society could be modelled (Watt 161).

Jane Austen is perhaps the best known of Richardson’s successors, who contributed to what Armstrong describes as a “tradition of ladies fiction that concentrated on the finer points of conduct necessary to secure a good marriage” (134). Her novels, which were intended as guidelines that unmarried women could use to “negotiate courtship, select a spouse and [learn how to] behave as husband and wife” set a standard for female coming-of-age narratives to end in matrimony with their employment of wedlock as a reward for conduct that conforms to the gender ideals associated with companionate marriage (Armstrong 135). Mary-Catherine Harrison explains that by the late eighteenth century, when Austen was writing her novels, marriage for love had gained “significant traction but remained a contested ideal” (119). Austen, who herself was a “strong advocate” of the companionate marital ideal, “as long as it was characterized by mutual esteem and compatibility rather than ephemeral passion” (119), endorsed what was largely viewed as a “spiritually pure and economically disinterested alternative to marriage for economic or familial pressure” (116) when she “nonetheless retains wealthy husbands” (122) as repayment for heroines who refuse to marry for material gain alone (122). In her best-known novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Austen incorporates several romantic subplots to illustrate the different motives for matrimony, including the loveless marriage between Charlotte Lucas and the irksome Mr. Collins that critiques eighteenth-century English society that had made marriage the only “provision for well-educated young women of small fortune” (Austen 87). Claire Tomalin points out that “the notion of marriage as a form of prostitution as spelt out by Mary Wollstonecraft” is explored when Charlotte, at the age of twenty-seven, seems to be making a reasonable decision by social standards when, instead of remaining a ‘spinster’, as unmarried women were called, she “buy[s] herself a social position as a married woman, [thereby] escaping the humiliation of a dependent daughter at home in exchange for sexual and domestic services”

(163). *Pride and Prejudice* is also critical in its depiction of Lydia Bennet's marriage to Mr. Wickham, which deteriorates with time because it is driven by blind passion, without any regard for practical matters such as education and income. Instead, it is the marriage between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, in which there exists a balance between affection and sound judgement, which serves as the romantic ideal. Tomalin observes that Elizabeth is the "clear moral centre" of *Pride and Prejudice* but Austen subverts the notion of passive femininity as popularised by novels like *Pamela* in its depiction of Elizabeth's "energy, wit, self-confidence and ability to think for herself" (162 - 163). It is not an outward display of physical delicacy but Elizabeth's integrity and depth of character when she refuses to settle on marriage for conventional or economic reasons that make her representative of idealised feminine virtues (Tomalin 164). Unlike Charlotte and Lydia, Elizabeth views marriage as a matter of great moral principle and it is her uncompromising attitude that attracts the rich Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth, despite her inferior family connections and lack of fortune. Misjudging him as arrogant and proud, Elizabeth initially rejects Darcy's marriage proposal, despite his being the "wealthiest of her acquaintance" (Harrison 120). As the novel progress, however, Elizabeth's growth as a character is closely linked to her developing relationship with Darcy whom she, after overcoming her earlier prejudice of his character, comes to admire for his strong sense of honour that mirrors her own. When Darcy proposes for a second time, Elizabeth decision to marry the man who she has come to appreciate and affectionately "look[s] up to [...] as a superior" signifies her emotional maturation (Austen 345). This notion of romantic love as the "great developer of the [female] self" would become the female bildungsroman's "most striking characteristic", as Elaine Hoffman Baruch points out (335). Typical of the female coming-of-age novels that would succeed Austen's, *Pride and Prejudice* concludes soon after Elizabeth and Darcy are romantically united. In the epilogue, marriage is upheld as women's greatest source of joy and fulfilment when Elizabeth is rewarded with a lifetime of domestic bliss as wife, mother and mistress of Pemberley, Darcy's luxurious country estate.

The motif of marriage as reward for the morally upstanding heroine that characterised Austen's novels would prove to be crucial in the construction of nineteenth-century fiction when it was adopted in Victorian novels, like Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852 - 1853), in which the concurrent figure of "The Angel in the House" came to full expression in the character of Esther Summerson. Named after a poem published in 1854 by Coventry Patmore, which venerated the

Victorian middle-class wife for her presumably innate moral disposition, “The Angel in the House” became the paragon of Victorian femininity in a society which limited women’s role to domesticity. England’s transition to an economic power and the subsequent rise of the middle class in the nineteenth century resulted in Victorian middle-class men dominating the public sector. Victorian women, however, were excluded from the world of business and politics on the premise that they were biologically inferior to men, both in their physical and intellectual abilities. Mary Lyndon Shanley explains that because men held the power to earn the income needed to purchase the household goods that England’s factories were producing, it became the woman’s responsibility to manage the family home in what was assumed to be her biologically predetermined role as mother, homemaker, moral guide and consumer of household goods (3). The “novelistic construction and deployment of the angelic female”, as Mary Poovey observes, performed “critical ideological work” in supporting the notions of complementary but unequal opposites (3). In *Bleak House*, for example, Esther, who despite being impoverished, illegitimate and scarred by smallpox proves herself as the paragon of selfless Victorian femininity, reveres the much respected Dr. Woodcourt because he is “so sensible, so earnest, so – everything that I am not” (Dickens 835). In her role as wife to Dr. Woodcourt, who himself conforms to Victorian standards of manliness, Esther becomes what many Victorians considered to be the “spiritual guardian” of the English household, which, as Shanley observes, was in itself sentimentalised as the “cornerstone of [British] civilisation” at a time when advancement in science and technology challenged England’s long-standing belief systems and social structures (3). Shanley explains that the Victorian middle-class viewed the family home as a “place of restoration for the boundaries that were obscured by the socio-economic problems brought on by industrialisation” (5-6). A woman’s duty, as illustrated by Esther Summerson, was first and foremost to maintain this sacred domestic space. This she could do by living out her predestined ‘purpose’ as mother to a “healthy loyal populace” by teaching them the “moral, religious, ethical and social precepts of good citizenship” and by creating a peaceful, love-filled refuge for her husband, away from what was viewed at the time as the morally corrupting world of business and commerce (Shanley 3).

Like *Bleak House*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s industrial novel *North and South* (1855) is an example of Victorian fiction that shares in the social vision of love and marriage as a solution to the problems caused by industrialisation. Her novel, which follows a similar plot structure to *Pride*

*and Prejudice*, ending in wedlock after the young couple rises above their personal prejudices, incorporates the notion of ‘marriage of opposites’ as a prototype on which Victorian England’s labour relations could be modelled. As a wife of a clergyman who lived and worked in Manchester, the largest industrialised city in England during the nineteenth century, Gaskell witnessed the socio-economic horrors caused by industrialism. In *North and South*, she allows her middle-class female readership, who had little access to the world of business and politics, a glimpse into the Victorian factory; a place that is revealed as a hazardous environment which not only remunerated long hours of gruelling work with meagre salaries, but often claimed the lives of its workers. Gaskell is critical of the exploitation of working-class people who, at a time before labour laws and health-and-safety regulations, were left at the mercy of their middle-class employers. In one of the novel’s subplots, Gaskell depicts the deterioration of a young working-class woman, Bessie Higgins, who succumbs to what was known as ‘consumption’ due to the inhalation of cotton dust, a common cause of death among textile industry workers. On Bessie’s deathbed, she decries the inhumane treatment of working-class people by factory owners who viewed their workers as if “all [they]’ve been born for is just to work [their] hearts and life away” (*North and South* 166). However, instead of violent uprising and resistance, Gaskell proposes the developing romantic relationship between female protagonist Margaret Hale and factory owner John Thornton, which is characterised by negotiation and collaboration, as a formula for obtaining class harmony at a time when hostile relationships between the different social classes threatened to jeopardise England’s prosperity as a nation. When Margaret, who comes from a genteel background, befriends the dying Bessie through the charity work she does among the poor, she is allowed an insider’s perspective and is therefore more sympathetic in her approach to the working-class people of Milton, as Gaskell’s fictional industrial city is named. Thornton, in contrast, is part of the ascending industrial middle class and as the owner of a factory has faced many obstacles to achieve the economic success that allows him to rise above his station. This has made Thornton distrustful of people with genteel connections as represented by Margaret, as well as those from the working class, like Bessie Higgins and her family. Margaret, who gets to know Thornton on a more personal level when he, in an attempt to improve himself, employs her father as a private tutor, is also secretly prejudiced against the factory owner. However, when Thornton’s disdainful attitude and unchecked apathy to requests by his workers for improved working conditions result in a potentially violent strike organised by

his angry employees, Margaret intervenes, in spite of her own initial dislike of him. Using her insight into the complexity of Victorian labour relations, Margaret encourages Thornton to be more benevolent to his employees and, in doing so, not only prevents bloodshed between employer and employee but gains Thornton's admiration and trust. When bankruptcy threatens to ruin Thornton and leave hundreds of his employees unemployed, Margaret comes to the rescue for a second time when she invests her inheritance in his factory. Their subsequent marriage symbolises not only the fusion of genteel capital and middle-class economic endeavour, but the amalgamation of 'feminine' philanthropy and the 'masculine' world of business and trade, as a means to ensure England economic future.

The Victorian novel's wedlock denouement, as *North and South* illustrates, played an important role in the reinstatement of an ideological status quo. Catherine Belsey explains that during the nineteenth century, marriage provided a symbol of stability in a changing world where "conventional cultural and signifying systems" were "thrown into disarray" (70). Idealised in such a way that "smoothed over [the] contradictions" (Belsey 58) imbedded in the marital ideal, nineteenth-century romantic denouements re-established the "illusion of a harmonious and coherent world" (Belsey 75). These happy endings, however, belied the lived reality of many Victorian women. Watt explains that the transition to an industrial society resulted in a "crisis of marriage which bore particularly hard upon the feminine part of [Britain's] population" (148). Prior to mechanisation, women had the opportunity to gain some measure of economic independence through handiwork such as spinning, weaving and lace-making (Watt 142). However, the "decay of the domestic industry" and subsequent "male dominance in the business sector" meant that the employment opportunities for women were greatly curtailed (Watt 142). In addition, the average wage for suitable employment was far below subsistence level. Watt notes that employed females earned "about a quarter of the average wage for men", which made it impossible for women to prosper in the public domain (142). Under these new socio-economic conditions, women, as Watt points out, "depended much more completely than before on their being able to marry and on the kind of marriage they made [...] as it determined their social, economic and geographical future" (148). Yet, with the marriage market flooded with females seeking to secure their futures through marriage, finding a husband became more difficult, especially without a proper dowry (Watt 142–143). Victorian women were not educated to be anything but mothers and wives, and even for that, as Wollstonecraft points out, they were ill-



equipped. Thus few alternatives existed for women who did not marry, apart from depending on male family members for their economic survival, or working for very low wages in what were often harsh conditions.

For working-class women, menial labour in one of industrialised England's many factories proved to be the only form of respectable employment; a career which could lead to an early death as illustrated in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). Many found prostitution to be a much more lucrative career choice. However, because any form of sexuality that transgressed the angelic ideal was strongly condemned, the prostitute found herself marginalised by Victorian society. The term "fallen woman", inspired by the Biblical figure of Eve, who after succumbing to temptation fell from the grace of God, as Angela Leighton observes, was a popular metaphor to refer to women who lost their sexual 'innocence', and was used to describe a range of transgressive female identities such as adulteresses, women who engaged in extramarital sex, and victims of seduction; within the Victorian context, however, the term 'fallen woman' was increasingly associated with prostitution (226). Significant in her role as the opposite of the "angel in the house", the "fallen woman" held a very specific symbolic value. Judith R. Walkowitz explains that the prostitute, as the personification of vice, became the embodiment of "corporeal smells" and "animal passions" that the middle-class man, assumed to be the epitome of rationality and control, had supposedly "repudiated and that the virtuous woman had "suppressed" (21). In a society that stressed women's purity, moral supremacy and domestic virtue, the prostitute was both literally and figuratively represented as the "conduit of infection of respectable society", and constituted a direct moral and physical threat to the sanctity of the middle-class home (Walkowitz 4). Various instances exist in which middle-class men infected their wives and unborn children with sexually transmitted diseases, as in the case of Isabella Beeton, author of the iconic *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), who allegedly died of syphilis at the age of twenty eight after she contracted the disease from her husband on their honeymoon. Not deemed a suitable subject for a polite female audience, the topic of 'fallen women' were mostly avoided by the Victorian novel or, if included, as was sometimes done in Victorian cautionary tales, received punishment for their noncompliance, most often succumbing to death. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* (1891), for example, transgressive female characters all meet their fate by being killed off by their authors before the novel's end.

Even these “tragically close outcomes” that befell the “fallen women” of Victorian cautionary tales, as Boone shows, “conspired to uphold a belief in romantic marriage as the most desired end of existence and hence a virtually unassailable closed truth” (65).

The prospects for impoverished middle-class women who were unable to secure a husband or benefactor were not much better, as few career options remained but to work as a governess; a less than ideal solution, as shown in novels like Austen’s *Emma* (1815), William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847/8) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Not only was it a poorly paid profession that left the governess in perpetual poverty, but, because her duties required of her to live away from her own family home in the house of her employer, where she held an awkward social position as neither servant nor part of the family, the governess often suffered from isolation, as Poovey explains:

Not a mother, the governess nevertheless performed the mother’s task; not a prostitute, she was suspiciously close to other sexualized women; not a lunatic, she was nevertheless deviant simply because she was a middle-class woman who had to work and because she was always in danger of losing her middle-class status and her “natural” morality. (14)

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë allows her readers some insight in the social no-man’s land that constituted the governess’s existence. As the orphaned daughter of a genteel mother and clergyman father, the impoverished Jane has little choice but to work as a governess at Thornfield Hall, where she is isolated from the outside world and vulnerable to exploitation. Like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane, who is passionate, determined to maintain her autonomy and, in her own words “naturally restless”, deviates from the passive heroine stereotype (Brontë 206). Having to spend her free time cooped up in her “lonely little room”, Jane is discontented with the “silence and solitude” of her existence as a governess and she longs for a fuller life with “practical experience”, “intercourse with own kind” and “acquaintance with a variety of character” (Brontë 154-164). However, unlike Austen who, as Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar observe, “admits to the limits and discomforts of the paternal roof, but learns to live beneath it”, Brontë does not make a “virtue of her heroine’s confinement” (121). Speaking on behalf of “millions who are condemned to a stiller doom”, Jane criticises patriarchal gender ideals that have limited female education, and confined women to the domestic sphere



(Brontë 155). Jane's direct, challenging voice, which Hillary M. Schor describes as "explicitly, and quite progressively feminist", broke from the Victorian novel's emphasis on subdued femininity. Her observation that "women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do" is an outright rejection Victorian England's 'separate spheres' ideal (Brontë 155). Armstrong explains that by portraying the "unseen desires of women", Brontë "indeed saw [her] work as a reaction against the tradition of domestic fiction exemplified by Austen" (192). However, the novel's ending, which conforms to traditional nineteenth-century novelistic convention, has presented some difficulty in reading *Jane Eyre* as a feminist bildungsroman. Not only does *Jane Eyre* follow the typical plot structure in which an upwardly mobile marriage serves as a reward for her virtue in refusing to make a loveless marriage to St. John Rivers, or enter into a clandestine relationship with Rochester while he remains married, but like Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage forms what Gilbert and Gubar describe as "an epilogue to [Jane's] selfhood" (367). The closing chapters of *Jane Eyre*, in which she marries Rochester after his wife's death in the fire that disfigures him and destroys Thornfield Hall, reveal that she has been her husband's "vision" and his "right hand" and mother to his son, true to the domestic ideal of the angel in the house (649).

Harrison points out that the heteronormative narratives of traditional Victorian novels, like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* "suppress and efface" relationships between women (117). According to Harrison, the "most meaningful relationship of both Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen's lives were with their sisters" (117). Yet, in their novels the significance of non-marital relationships is "diminished by virtue of the dominant plot" that centralises the heroine path towards wedlock (Harrison 117). Typically, for the Victorian heroine to achieve self-actualisation, she is faced with the task of securing a financially advantageous match with a marriage partner of her choice, which, as Baruch explains, she does by proving herself more virtuous than any female competitors she might have (339). This makes novelistic depictions of "female bonding extraordinary difficult [as] women almost inevitably turned against women" as they competed against each other for the affection of men, according to Gilbert and Gubar (38). In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Elizabeth finds herself in a romantic rivalry with the wealthy and beautiful, albeit superficial Caroline Bingley. Yet, Elizabeth's moral character makes her the more desirable choice of the principled Darcy, who himself personifies the

Victorian masculine ideal. Similarly, *Jane Eyre*'s heroine is the "embodiment of every virtue Rochester's monstrous wife lacks" (Armstrong 195). Like Mr. B in Richardson's *Pamela*, Rochester's second marriage to the modest English governess is depicted as an agent of transformation that holds the power to turn the dark and dangerous Byronic hero into the perfect husband. However, the mad Bertha Mason first needs to die before Jane can marry Rochester, thereby securing her own future and reinstating him to the Victorian masculine ideal of husband and father. As *Jane Eyre* comes to a close, Jane's highly optimistic sketch of married life in which she claims to be "at one" with Rochester, unlike Bertha "precisely suited in character" (Brontë 865), underscores the notion of marriage a "a practical and an imaginative necessity for a fully experienced life" that not only shaped traditional Victorian novels but established the plot for popular romance still current today (Boone 6).

### **The Marriage Plot in Contemporary Fiction**

Contemporary female fiction in which the heroine achieves growth and fulfilment outside the boundaries of heterosexual partnership is rare. Elaine Showalter points out that during the 1960s the female novel entered a "new and dynamic phase" because female authors insisted upon the right to "vocabularies previously reserved for male writers and to describe formerly taboo areas of the female experience" (34). Yet, despite doing away with nineteenth-century propriety that as Showalter observes "expected women's novels to reflect the feminine values [the Victorians] exalted" (7), the Victorian marriage plot "lives on" (Harrison 113) in the proliferation of female centred fiction that continues to rely on the traditional narrative structure that centralises marriage as an ahistorical, natural part of female development (7). In *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) Helen Fielding, for example, comments on the "cultural pressure" that Victorian novelistic convention continues to exert on a generation of women who like female protagonist Bridget Jones, "are no longer dependent on the institution for economic survival" (Harrison 123). Yet, as Harrison points out, Fielding "shores up the institution through the plot structure of her novel" that concludes in a romantic union between Bridget and the male protagonist named Mr. Darcy (123). Like Victorian novels that were written "by, for and about" (Harrison 117) women, to promote patriarchal gender ideals that would equip them for their pre-determined role in society as wives and mothers, popular romance like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, remain to be a "gendered genre" (Harrison 118) whose employment of the marriage plot structure perpetuates

the notion of wedlock as women's "most important personal relationship" (Harrison 116). Jeanne Dubino explains that modelled on novels like *Pamela*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, contemporary renditions are "generally told from the heroine's point of view" (103). The hero in these novels, like their Victorian antecedents, "is *always* [emphasis in original] older, taller, and richer than the heroine" and, typical of the Byronic ideal as exemplified by Darcy and Rochester, "usually moody, dark and inscrutable" (Dubino 103). After overcoming obstacles, mostly in the form of mutual misunderstandings, the idealized hero and sexually liberated heroine arrive at "a correct reading of their love for one another" (Dubino 103). As soon as the objective of romantic partnership has been achieved, the novel concludes (Harrison 128). However, Harrison explains that because the "events that follows marriage are seldom documented, the fictional ideal presents the reader with an unrealistic view of marriage, nearly impossible to live up to" (123). Like Victorian fiction, popular romance contains within itself the power to shape what women view as the ideal marriage, and perfect marriage partner (Harrison 123). When these ideals are modelled on the patriarchal ideology of the marriage plot, popular romance works against the feminist cause.

### **The Victorian Counter-Traditional Novel**

There are Victorian novels that offer a counter-traditional narrative as a model for contemporary writers, which does not subscribe to what Boone defines as the "socially constructed myth of marriage perpetuity" (144). Poovey reminds us that Victorian middle-class ideology was "often contested and under construction", and because it was "always in the making", it remained open to "revision, dispute and the emergence of oppositional formulation" (3). The Victorian counter-traditional novel reflects the growing demand for reform in regards to "marital laws, divorce proceedings and women's suffrage" that occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Poovey 3). Characterised by what Boone terms a "profound revision and rethinking of traditionally signifying modes as form and closure as well as content", narratives of courtship and marriage in the nineteenth-century counter-tradition distance themselves from romance as it is traditionally understood (184). Instead of employing wedlock to "bolster the myth of a tightly knit social order" (Boone 17), the counter-traditional novel reveals the "irresolvable conflicts buil[t] into a code of conjugal love that defined sexes as complementary but unequal partners" (Boone 142). It does so by following different plot structures to more traditional novels like

*Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South* and *Jane Eyre* that are centred on a young couple who overcome obstacles before the novel concluded in a happy marriage. Boone explains that the counter-traditional novel's subversion of the novelist marriage tradition can occur either through the exposure of the "dangers of [the traditional marriage plot's] socially constructed myths by following the course of wedlock beyond its expected close and into the uncertain textual realms of marital stalemate and impasse" or by "inventing trajectories of the single protagonist [...] whose successful existence outside the convention calls into question the viability of marital roles and arrangements" (19).

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) is an example of the former, where the marriage between Dorothea Brook and Mr. Casaubon that occurs relatively early in the text "introduces tension and conflict rather than resolving it" (Harrison 114). With her disregard for fashion, excessive religiousness and naive plans to uplift the poor, Dorothea seems to embody the modesty and virtue that the traditional Victorian novel glorifies. However, under her sober facade, Dorothea harbours unrealistic expectations about marriage. This leads her to enter into an unsatisfactory marriage with Casaubon who is much older than she is. Dorothea has a strong desire to be of some use and, in a social environment with little options available to women, she has been conditioned to believe that a helpmeet to a man she views as "above [her] both in judgement and all knowledge" will give purpose to her otherwise purposeless existence (Eliot 33). However, when her novelistic expectations of marriage as life's "grandest path" (Eliot 32) are not met and "the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind [are] replaced by ante-rooms of winding passages which seems to lead nowhere" (Eliot 228), Dorothea's disillusionment manifests in "inward fits of anger and repulsion" (Eliot 228). This causes a rift between her and Casaubon, who himself has his own set of very different expectations of marriage. Faced with the difficult realisation that "though he had won a lovely and noble-hearted girl, he had not won delight", Casaubon retreats to his study where he spends long hours away from his wife (Eliot 114). The tension and conflict between the newlyweds is further amplified when Dorothea befriends Casaubon's nephew Will Ladislav. Jealous of Ladislav, but "too proud to say so", Casaubon forbids contact between his wife and his nephew and later, on his deathbed, even drafts a will which stipulates that Dorothea will be disinherited should she marry Ladislav (Eliot 222). While Eliot is not unsympathetic to the insecure Casaubon, *Middlemarch* is a critique of nineteenth-century social constructs and their cultural

inscriptions that left Victorian women naive, ill-informed and unprotected by legal systems that allowed men to control their wives, even after they had died. Even so, the novel reverts to convention when the anticipated union between Dorothea and Ladislav concludes the novel.

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), similar to *Middlemarch*, explores Victorian England's unjust marital laws that made it near-impossible for women to lawfully escape their abusive husbands. The plot, which is centred on the life of Helen Huntington after she gets married to the selfish and self-indulgent Arthur, portrays the "unhappy marriage in all its ugliness and destructiveness", which was, as Aysegül Kuglin observes, "a rare and courageous undertaking for literature at the time" (46). When Helen enters into wedlock, despite warnings of Arthur's character, she does so believing that she will be able to reform him. However, unlike the transformation that Rochester, for example, undergoes in his marriage to Jane Eyre, the adulterous Arthur's alcohol abuse only worsens as their marriage progresses. Helen, for the most part, endures Arthur's abuses, but when his disagreeable behaviour has a negative influence on their young son, Helen decides to take action. In Victorian England, as Jenna Dodenhoff explains, there were few legal avenues through which mistreated wives could gain their freedom (1). The law in England was "designed to protect marriage, and made separation very difficult to obtain" (Dodenhoff 1). Not only was divorce very expensive, "putting it beyond the capacity of most members of society, especially middle-class women who depended on their husbands for economic survival", but prior to the 1857 Divorce Act, divorce, as Dodenhoff explains, was "contingent on both adultery and assault on the husband's part, while a husband wishing to divorce his wife needed only to prove his wife had committed adultery" (1). In addition, divorced women, regardless of the circumstance of the divorce, were "denied contact with their children" until the 1839 Custody of Infants Act allowed women limited access to children under the age of seven (Dodenhoff 1). It is for this reason that Helen has little choice but to flee in secret, after which she and her son live a hidden life in a remote part of England, where she hopes her husband won't be able to find them. However, when Arthur falls ill, Helen returns to her marital home to take care of him. The novel concludes when after Arthur's death, Helen, like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, entering into a second, more successful marriage.

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), it can be argued, is an example of a Victorian counter-traditional novel that follows a plot structure in which the single female protagonist leads a successful life outside of the boundaries of marriage. Like the orphaned Jane Eyre, female

protagonist Lucy Snowe is forced to earn a living of her own, which takes her from England to Belgium where she is employed as a school teacher. The plot follows a bildungsroman structure as it portrays the many obstacles that Lucy is faced with in the difficult task of securing a future for herself in a nineteenth-century patriarchal environment that limited the options for middle-class women. It is while earning her bread as a school teacher that Lucy meets fellow teacher Monsieur Paul and becomes engaged to him. However, before they can marry, Monsieur Paul dies in a shipwreck, after which Lucy, who inherits what he has, remains unmarried and carves out a career for herself as an owner of a school.

### **Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Marriage Plot**

Although Boone's study on love and the form of fiction does not include neo-Victorianism, his argument can be extended to apply to the neo-Victorian novel which, I will argue, is a continuation of the "counter-traditional" project (2). Similar to nineteenth-century narratives like *Middlemarch*, *Wildfell Hall* and *Villette* that, as Boone observes "dare[d] to re-envision and rewrite the traditional canon", the neo-Victorian novel seeks to "decenter the presumed universality of the dominant sexual order" through its ironic reconstruction of the past that subverts the boundaries of Victorian propriety (Boone 21). John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is significant as one of the first post-modern revisionings of the nineteenth century that, by "situating itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction", as Linda Hutcheon points out, initiated an ongoing conversation with the nineteenth century in a manner that challenged dominant historical accounts (4). By introducing a female protagonist who is simultaneously representative of the emancipated womanhood upheld by the second wave feminism of the 1960s and modelled on Victorian prototypes— "the lower-class woman educated, like Tess Durbeyfield, beyond her class", "the governess that experiences status incongruence", and "the naive innocent protagonist who, like Maggie Tulliver, in the *Mill and the Floss* suffered the unwarranted loss of her reputation" – Fowles, as Alan Robinson explains, challenged the representation of the 'fallen woman' as a deviant that should be punished (124). As what Robinson terms a "protagonist rebel", Sarah Woodruff does not conform to the Victorian ideal of virtuous femininity (125). Rather, proud, deviant, and determined to "never have [...] a husband", Sarah – who despite being a virgin, is ostracised by the community of Lyme Regis after a seemingly transgressive love affair with a shipwrecked



sailor named Vargueness who made false promises to marry her – appropriates labels such as “The French Lieutenant’s Whore” with which she is shunned, to construct a new identity for herself in a society that has limited the role of women to angelic beings (Robinson 125). By rejecting the “demure”, “obedient”, “shy” feminine “look” that the Victorian age “favoured” (Fowles 10), Sarah represents a break from convention, particularly to male protagonist Charles Smithson who, after having sex with her, only to discover that it is him, and not Vargueness, that “had forced a virgin”, comes to question not only his own culpability in the Victorian double standard that condemns Victorian middle-class women and not men for sexual transgression, but the nineteenth-century pseudoscientific opinions that has limited women to “nonsexual, nondesiring and nonsinful” beings (Harrison 118). The *French Lieutenant’s Woman* calls to mind *Pride and Prejudice*, only in Fowles’s novel it is the male protagonist that is forced to confront his personal prejudice of the proud, sensual Sarah. When Charles finally comes to the realisation that it is Sarah he truly loves, he terminates his engagement to Ernestina, whose mindless imitation of Victorian convention renders her angelic, albeit “a little characterless” and above all “artificial” (Fowles 129). However, the novel’s double ending which, as Cora Kaplan observes, “marks the novel’s deliberate intent not to offer the reader the closure [...] it satirise[s]”, Sarah does not marry Charles, nor does she die (96). Instead, following a counter-traditional plot structure in which she emerges as what was known in the Victorian era as a “New Woman”, the emancipated Sarah lives happily and freely in a Pre-Raphaelite household where she finds fulfilment as an artist’s apprentice.

The *French Lieutenant’s Woman*, in its “exculpation of its ‘fallen’ heroine from the abjection of ruin” (Kaplan 97), sought to “overturn the judgemental closure of Victorian fiction” (Kaplan 97) and, in doing so, gave rise to a subgenre of post-modern neo-Victorian literature that, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn observe, is characterised by the “(re)interpreting, (re)discovering and (re)visioning” of Victorian ideals and ideologies that continue to shape the western world long after the close of the nineteenth century. More than just “historical fiction set in the nineteenth century” (4), Neo-Victorianism does not simply recycle and deliver a “stereotypical and un-nuanced readings of the Victorians and their culture”, Heilmann and Llewellyn explain (6). Rather, by foregrounding nineteenth-century myths related to race, class and gender, the neo-Victorian novel acts as an “imaginative re-engagement” with the Victorian era (Heilmann and Llewellyn 6). This process, as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* has shown, involves some

element of “critique, transformation” and, perhaps most importantly, the “destabilisation” of Victorian dogma that continues to haunt the modern consciousness, Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox argue (2). Subsequent to the publication of Fowles’s novel, as Jonathan Loesberg observes, an “antagonism to Victorian respectability”, most often in the shape of “an openness about sexuality”, has become the standard for post-modern neo-Victorian fictions (366). Sarah Waters’s homo-erotic neo-Victorian novels, for example, in their explicit depictions of nineteenth-century lesbian sex, subvert the heteronormative ideal that characterises Victorian fiction. Similarly, in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2011), Michel Farber allows his readers insight into the graphic sexual realism of Victorian prostitution that was denied Victorian readerships. In its full disclosure of the underbelly of Victorian English culture, which Victorian authors could not write about without risking accusations of impropriety, the neo-Victorian novel foregrounds that which during the nineteenth-century remained hidden from view. Yet, what has become the sub-genre’s compulsive employment of transgressive sexuality as a means to contest what Boone terms the “hegemony of the novelistic marriage tradition” has proven to be problematic (2). Kohlke argues that neo-Victorian novelists’ “obsession with exhibiting the underside of nineteenth-century propriety and morality” (345) has resulted in a sensationalist reconstruction of the Victorian past that carries with it “very real dangers of inadvertent recidivism and obfuscation” (358). Not only has neo-Victorianism’s attempt at a “retrospective sexual liberation of the nineteenth century” resulted in what Kohlke describes as “a literary striptease” which allows contemporary readers, like those who indulged in the pre-Richardson erotic novels, to “read for defilement” but I would argue that the subgenre’s glorification of transgressive sex as a reaction against patriarchal literary convention has failed to challenge the inherent ideologies of the conventional marriage plot (346). *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, for example, does not conclude in wedlock. Even so, Sarah Woodruff’s transformation from a lonely governess to a “self-possessed”, financially self-sustaining ‘New Woman’ is indivisible from the illicit sexual encounter with male protagonist Charles Smithson that liberates her from restrictive convention. Similarly, Sarah Water’s lesbian bildungsroman, *Tipping the Velvet*, despite breaking from hetero-normative tradition, trances its protagonist’s growth through the numerous lesbian relationships she has, with the traditional romantic denouements that occur after protagonist Nan urges Florence to “let [her] be [Florence’s] sweetheart, and [her] comrade” marking the completion of Nan’s path to self-discovery (541). The trope of extramarital sex as a



gateway for female liberation is also observable in Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* (1990) and A.S Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), both neo-Victorian novels that will form part of the discussion in this thesis. Set partly in the nineteenth and twentieth century, these novels allow romantic denouements for its present-day heroines, which although not ending in marriage, nevertheless follow a conventional plot structure that concludes the novel in a romanticised sexual encounter. Katie Kapurch explains that in neo-Victorian fiction, sexual initiation as a rebellious strike against the privileging of virginity as synonymous with a woman's worth, often serves as a redefinition of agency in womanhood (106 – 108). However, Boone explains that the substitution of the marital ideal with the "idealized sexual affair" does not "automatically transform the transhistorical 'rules' of sexual hierarchy, of dichotomisation into mutually exclusive and hierarchal roles, or of the exploitation encoded in the institution of marriage" (135). Nor does it "answer the question of how the sexual liberated female protagonist is to establish an autonomous identity" (Boone 137). Rather, the "displacement of the one ideal by that of the other has served to maintain an essentially contagious sexual order" (Boone 135). The neo-Victorian novel's use of transgressive sex as a seemingly "liberating strike against the romantic ideology embedded in the marital ideal" (135), to use Boone's description, still contains within itself the familiar model of "lifelong, permanent and even hierarchal ordered love" (Boone 130) that characterised the ideologically charged Victorian novel making of it a "repository for many of the values and assumptions once associated with the romantic wedlock ideal" (135).

## Chapter Overview

Dissimilar to neo-Victorian novels set entirely in the nineteenth century like *French Lieutenant's Woman* or those that juxtapose Victorian and contemporary plotlines like *Possession* and *Changing Heaven*, the novels discussed in this thesis are set entirely in twentieth- and twenty-first-century contexts. I will argue here that they are pertinent examples of neo-Victorianism because of their mostly implicit, as in Patricia Park's *Re Jane*, or overt, as Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, use and commentary on Victorian marriage itself and its configuration in fiction as content and structure. As counter-traditional novels that enlarge the field of neo-Victorianism, these novels steer away from the emphasis on the Victorians' hidden sexual lives and transgressions in its "subversive attack" (Boone 2) on Victorian novelistic conventions and their

contemporary afterlives. Typical of neo-Victorianism these novels rewrite classic Victorian fiction, but from a post-Victorian context. In *On Chesil Beach*, discussed in Chapter 2, Ian McEwan appropriates Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" (1867) to explore the way Victorian middle-class dogma continued to shape romantic relationship in Britain after the nineteenth century ended. During the post-war 1950s, like the Victorian era, marriage represented stability and social well-being, which meant that Britain's traditional approach to sex and marriage, remained largely unchanged. McEwan's novel, set on the brink of the 1960s Sexual Revolution that would irrevocably change the way the western world would view themselves and their sexual relationships, follows the wedding night of a sexually inexperienced English couple who, like the couple in Arnold's poem, are spending their honeymoon at the coast. In "Dover Beach", as in *North and South* and *Jane Eyre*, romantic love is upheld as a unifying force in a world full of uncertainty and change. In *On Chesil Beach*, however, McEwan subverts the stabilising faith in marriage when, instead of uniting the couple, marriage, with all its unaltered Victorian ideologies, becomes the force that drives the couple apart. The novel ends with the female protagonist remaining unmarried, but achieving a successful career as violinist. In *Re Jane*, discussed in Chapter 3, Patricia Park allows not only for the rethinking and rewriting of the female bildungsroman which, as Boone observes, "until recently [...] has been a love plot" (74), but the novel, which is set in contemporary New York and South-Korea, is a case in point of neo-Victorianism as a "global, adaptive and adaptational phenomenon", to use Anonija Primorac and Monica Piertzak -Franger's description (1). The novel's title is indicative both of the female protagonist's Korean heritage in which last names are traditionally placed before first names and the novel's rewriting of *Jane Eyre*. However, it deviates from the traditional plot structure, as can be found in Brontë's novel, where female Bildung has "come to be seen as synonymous with the action of courtship" by envisioning a future for its Korean-American protagonist that is not limited to traditional female gender roles associated with marriage and motherhood. Alice Hoffman's *Here on Earth*, discussed in Chapter 4, also steers away from a plot structure that concludes in a romantic denouement. As a contemporary re-writing of *Wuthering Heights*, *Here on Earth* re-imagines the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine in a twentieth-century context where Victorian class difference and oppressive marital laws no longer prevent them from entering into an extramarital affair. However, unlike the proliferation of *Wuthering Heights* adaptations that exist in popular fiction, Hoffman does not romanticise the

union. Instead, she highlights the inherent danger in novelistic ideology that has made women in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, like their Victorian counterparts, vulnerable to abuse. In the discussion to follow, I will explore in more depth how the three above mentioned novels break from nineteenth-century novelistic conventions that find their conclusion in romantic union, whether it is a sexual partnership or marriage, and in doing so contribute to the reconfiguration of the literary paradigms of love, romance and sexuality in neo-Victorian fiction.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night”: Exploring the After-Effect of Victorian Ideology on Modern Marriage in Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*.**

In 1876, when Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” first proposed romantic love to counterbalance the religious doubt and disillusionment that came with modern progress, England was already losing faith in conventional Victorian ideas and institutions. Rapid industrial expansion during the nineteenth century, together with advances in scientific discovery, brought with it many socio-economic challenges that called into question England’s traditional social order and propelled the nation towards social reform. In their introduction to *The Victorian Studies Reader*, Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam explain that it was only after the death of Queen Victoria that the term “Victorian” came to be associated with “earnestness, prudery, hypocrisy, [...] double standards, snobbery, sentimentalism, utilitarianism, imperialism [and] narrow mindedness” (1). The Bloomsbury group, of which Lytton Strachey was a founding member, largely contributed to this disparaging image of the Victorians (Boyd and McWilliam 8). As a new generation of intellectuals that left the nineteenth century behind them, Bloomsbury initiated a period of anti-Victorianism characterised by contempt for what was at the time perceived as the rigid and repressive social structures of the Victorian era (Boyd and McWilliam 6). By embracing “creativity and honest conversation, particularly about sex”, members of the Bloomsbury group deliberately “undercut” what they viewed as the “stifling Victorian prudery” of their forebears (Boyd and McWilliam 8). In *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which is widely considered the book that “really put anti-Victorianism on the map”, as Boyd and McWilliam point out, Strachey’s reinterpretation of Victorian heroes departed from the previously “respectful tone, elaborate reproduction of letters, and lack of the inner life of the subject” that characterised nineteenth-century biographies (Boyd and McWilliam 8). By depicting much-venerated Victorian figures such as Florence Nightingale, and later also Queen Victoria herself, with contradicting public and private personalities, Strachey introduced “debunking” as a narrative strategy (Boyd and McWilliam 8). A century later, debunking of Victorians remains popular, particularly in neo-Victorianism. Much like Strachey’s attempt to offer a “revealing searchlight into the hidden recesses” of Victorian life (*Eminent Victorians* 4), numerous neo-Victorian novelists have set out to rewrite Victorian narratives in a way that challenges the original representation of the

nineteenth century. The sub-genre's fixation on what Kohlke describes as the "nineteenth-century erotic" has, however, led to neo-Victorianism being criticised for a reconstruction of history that fictionalises the Victorian period into a "sexually explicit narrative for the enjoyment of contemporary audiences" (345). Yet, neo-Victorianism's retrospective reengagement with the past cannot simply be discounted. Neo-Victorian novels such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, through their exploration of familiar Victorian themes, have shown that typical nineteenth-century concerns remain pertinent at present, and thus require reconsideration. Ian McEwan, like Fowles and Byatt, examines the after-effect of Victorian gender constructs and the marriage ideal on post-Victorian England. However, what differentiates McEwan's novel from the two earlier novels is that instead of fictionally recreating the Victorian era and its sexual history in order to analyse contemporary society's rootedness in Victorian culture, *On Chesil Beach* is set in the 1960s, an historical period of great significance to the field of neo-Victorian studies.

For most of the early twentieth century, Victorian middle-class values maintained a stronghold on British social and sexual relationships because, as McWilliams in "Victorian Sensations, Neo-Victorian Romances: Response" explains, early "twentieth-century moderns (for all the anti-Victorianism of the Bloomsbury group) failed to truly disown the Victorian inheritance" (107). It is this Victorian inheritance and its impact on the romantic relationships of early twentieth-century Britons that McEwan explores in *On Chesil Beach*. Set in England shortly before the 1960s Sexual Liberation Movement gained prominence, *On Chesil Beach* follows the calamitous wedding night of the sexually inexperienced Florence Pointing and Edward Mayhew, who are, to some extent, representative of a generation of Englishmen and women who, after 1901, continued to submit to what the novel describes as the Victorian era's "thousand unacknowledged rules [that] still applied" (McEwan 18). By the 1960s, which as explained in the novel, is Florence and Edward's "first decade of adult life", considerable socio-economic progress had been made (McEwan 25). Boyd and McWilliam point out that the "rising standards of living, assisted by economic growth and the welfare state" that occurred from the 1950s onward, narrowed the class divide that would previously have prevented a marriage between the upper middle-class Florence and Edward, who comes from a lineage of working-class men (13). Furthermore, the fight for women's suffrage, which continued until 1928 when the "Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928" granted women electoral equality

with men, had been long won. The impact of these advancements is evident in the young couple's lives. As members of the Labour Party, who share in the "vision of a modern country where there was equality and things actually got done" (McEwan 25), Florence and Edward's forward-thinking political views differentiate them from an older generation, "the last of the Victorians" (McEwan 41), who "still dreamed of Empire" (McEwan 25). Yet, remnants of Victorian decorum, which prevented frank conversations about sex, shape the couple's developing relationship (3). Their inability to express their sexual needs is one of the main reasons for the disintegration of their short-lived marriage.

Ironically, at the time of Florence and Edward's courtship and marriage, England gradually began to adopt a more Bloomsbury-like attitude that would later establish sex as a legitimate point of discussion and allow for sexual conflicts such as the young couple's to be voiced. In *Sexual Revolutions*, Alain Giami and Gert Hekma explain that a series of historical events mostly centred in the early 1960s, such as the "ascendency of the contraceptive pill", the legalisation of abortion, "the homosexual emancipation and gay liberation", and the rise of feminism, greatly contributed to "new perspectives and practices regarding sexuality" (1). On the eve of their wedding, however, the newlyweds are oblivious to what Peter Mathews describes as the "historical currents that swirl around [them]" (82). The closing chapter's emphasis on what is described as "the sudden guiltless elevation of sensual pleasure" that would occur soon after the annulment of their marriage underpins the tragic nature of the novel's ending in which the newlyweds impulsively part ways, never to be reunited (McEwan 161). In the years to follow Florence and Edward's separation, England would bear witness to what Giami and Hekma describe as an "explosion of young people, women, gays and lesbians, students and all kinds of marginalised people [who] took to the streets and revolted" (10). Should Florence and Edward have deferred marriage, it is possible that they too might have been a part of the Sexual Liberation Movement that followed in Bloomsbury's footsteps by distancing itself from the Victorian moralism still prevalent in social institutions. Emerging as a new generation adamant to overturn what they viewed as restrictive practices of the past, supporters of the Sexual Liberation Movement, as Giami and Hekma explain, "attacked" the institution of marriage and the nuclear family and developed "alternative relational models such as communal living and group sex" (1). Notions of feminine virtue, which after the nineteenth century continued to shape "young, educated" (McEwan 3) women like Florence and their attitude to sex, were superseded

by the “uncomplicated willingness of [...] many beautiful women” (McEwan 161) to have sex without the requirement of marriage, or the promise thereof. This newfound sense of “sexual openness” and “freedom of speech” also brought with it a proliferation of previously prohibited erotic texts and images into the public realm. Giami and Hekma explain that in an attempt to free itself from the restrictions of the past, the media “opened up in regards to sex and sexuality”, and this in turn led to the creation of “new means of communication” (11). Not only did “newspapers, radio and in particular the new television broadcast images, events and new erotic ideals to millions of people”, but, for the first time, the “clandestine world of pornography and prostitution” became visible in English society (Giami and Hekma 11). It did not take long before the “eroticism, pornography and nudity [that] blossomed in the 1960s alternative scene” became the “commercial activities” of the new sex industry, as it is known today (Giami and Hekma 11). This new “visual eroticisms”, albeit “largely female and heterosexual”, led to what Giami and Hekma describe as the “sexualisation of Western society” that increasingly influenced, and continues to influence, “politics, the arts, various institutions and even everyday life” (11).

The Sexual Liberation Movement’s drive towards the de-Victorianisation of twentieth-century England had, as Cora Kaplan observes, “unexpected, and positive, cultural effects”, particularly for the way in which it “liberated our ways of knowing the nineteenth century” (85). Contrary to the obscurity that Strachey predicted would befall the nineteenth century when in the preface to *Eminent Victorians* he claimed that “[t]he history of the Victorian Age will never be written [,] we know too much about it” (21), the reversal of censorship laws that occurred in Britain during the 1960s “widened the scope for the legal distribution of literary erotica”, which allowed for the republication of previously obscured Victorian pornography (Kaplan 86). This uncovering of nineteenth-century England’s sexual subculture gave what Kaplan describes as “a new twist to the way in which sex and the Victorian were conjoined”, which led to a renewed scholarly interest in the nineteenth century and its historical representation (86). Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (1965) was particularly ground-breaking for the way in which it exposed the nineteenth-century textualisation of sex. As a “taboo-busting rejection of Victorian hypocrisies”, *The Other Victorians* included several examples of previously obscured nineteenth-century pornography, as well as Victorian medical texts by the Victorian physician William Acton, to illustrate that the



Victorians enjoyed a more complex sexual culture than what was previously thought (Boyd and McWilliam 21). In doing so *The Other Victorians* might be said to anticipate the field of Victorian studies as it introduced an alternative account of Victorian sexuality that challenged reigning stereotypes. *The Other Victorians* was also a key influence on Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), which contests the misrepresentation of the Victorian era as a period during which sex was unspeakable and unthinkable, a false impression that he termed the "repressive hypothesis" (10). Foucault conceded that the Victorians, more than the generations before them, were reluctant to speak freely about sex. However, using nineteenth-century medical texts such as Acton's, as example, Foucault observes that, far from silencing sex as a taboo subject, the Victorians inaugurated many authorised discourses in the areas of "economy, pedagogy, medicine and justice" which considered sex a legitimate subject of discussion, open to be studied, analysed, classified and understood in the name of public interest (33). Sex which deviated from the boundaries of the conventional married bond was of particular interest to the Victorians, and Foucault reveals that a proliferation of medical texts and scientific studies were produced that scrutinised and categorised sexual behaviour that did not conform to the heteronormative ideal (25). According to what Foucault terms the nineteenth-century "Science of Sexuality", any form of extramarital sex, including masturbation, was considered "perversions", condemned as "unnatural, unlawful and in many instances annexed to mental illness" (Foucault 39-40). What Foucault claims is that by legitimizing certain sexual practices, while establishing the rest as disorders, nineteenth-century pseudo-science exercised power over sex which not only marginalised those "other Victorians" who did not adhere to the heteronormative ideal but continued to dominate people's perception of sex and sexual relationships long after the Victorian era ended.

Considered as a "forbidden topic", as Angela Leighton observes, the "other Victorians" were mostly ignored by nineteenth-century novels, or if included, as was sometimes done in Victorian cautionary tales, received punishment for their non-compliance, most often by succumbing to a tragic death (239). In the novelistic development of the 1960s, however, the "other Victorians" were centralised. Samantha Matthews explains that the twentieth-century novelists "were quick to follow scholars [like Marcus and Foucault] in recovering and reinterpreting Victorian people, texts and topics for a new generation – creating a subgenre of historical metafiction" known as neo-Victorianism that combined "postmodern traits with a historicity redolent of Victorian



fiction” (284). Like the writing of Strachey, Marcus and Foucault, the neo-Victorian novel undermines what Mark Llewellyn describes as the “stability of a presumed hegemonic narrative” (165). Through a simulacrum of the nineteenth century that foregrounds the narrative of those “other Victorians” who were previously ignored, and exploring previously forbidden themes of sex and eroticism, the neo-Victorian novel embraces “a kind of democratism of imaginative representation that is not always found in Victorianism”(167). John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, by giving agency to a previously marginalised figure like the “fallen woman”, allowed for an alternative account of Victorian history and in doing so pioneered neo-Victorian literature that self-reflexively challenges nineteenth century ideas and concepts that continue to dominate the way people in the twentieth century view themselves and others. Numerous subsequent neo-Victorian novels have materialised, many of which attempt to liberate what Marie-Kohlke describes as the “lost voices and repressed histories of minorities left out of the public record” (Introduction 9). However, what has become a “tradition” of exposing, in explicit detail, the underside of Victorian decorum has led to a critique of neo-Victorianism as historical fiction with a “prurient penchant for revelling in indecency and salaciousness” (Sexation 345). Cautioning against neo-Victorianism’s sensationalised depictions of the nineteenth century, Kohlke observes that by projecting “illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past”, neo-Victorian fiction runs the risk of reasserting a “supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress” (345) that is “disturbingly infused with preferred ignorance – or deliberate denial – of our own culture’s complicity in [...] systems that enable continuing sexual exploitation and oppression (347).

In *Possession: A Romance*, which parodies contemporary society’s obsession with the Victorians, A.S Byatt exposes the secrets of central character Randolph Ash and his wife Ellen’s Victorian middle-class marriage that on the surface appears to be ideal in all ways except for the absence of children. In Ellen’s diaries, that after her death becomes a topic of scholarly research, she is revealed as the quintessential ‘angel in the house’, preoccupied with the mundanity of domesticity. Yet, when the omniscient narrator grants the reader access to Ellen’s personal thought, it is revealed that her “expansive ordinary eloquences” (Byatt 129) purposefully hid that she suffered from a lifelong fear of sex, which resulted in the Ash marriage being childless and, unknown to the academics who study her diaries, unconsummated (Kaplan 98). It is, however, not only the Victorian house wife that suffers from sexual dysfunction in *Possession*. By

juxtaposing the twentieth century with the Victorian era, Byatt illustrates that contemporary women can suffer as “much from the hypocrisy of liberation, as the Victorians did from the effects of repression” (Kaplan 96). Kaplan explains that “though less redolent of a casebook pathology”, the twentieth-century academic Maude Bailey struggles with a fear of intimacy that is comparable to that of Ellen, even if it is more the emotional aspects of a relationship that leave her cold, as opposed to Ellen’s fear of being physically intimate (Kaplan 98). In the final pages of the novel, Maude confesses to “her would-be lover Roland” that she is terrified of romantic relationships, not only because her “cool good looks make others see her as a potential property or idol” but Maud is afraid that a romantic relationship, which she associates with a loss of autonomy, will be detrimental to her career as an academic (Kaplan 98). Kaplan notes that Maud’s romantic “hang-ups [...] are as cruel a disability as Ellen’s”, particularly in a world where it is assumed of intelligent, career-driven women to be “sexually confident” (Kaplan 98). However, unlike Ellen, who lived at a time when notions of propriety prevented husbands and wives to have open conversations about their sexual desires, or lack thereof, Maud is able to overcome her fear of intimacy when she finds “heterosexual love and sexual satisfaction at last with Roland” (Kaplan 98). As the subtitle suggests, the novel conforms to the conventional romantic resolution when together, Maud and Roland set out to find what is described as a “modern way” to be together that is not defined by traditional notions on romantic love, like “total obsession, night and day”, that Maud finds so threatening to her autonomy (Byatt 507).

Following in the footsteps of Fowles and Byatt, McEwan’s novel explores the aftermath of Victorian marital ideology on contemporary sexual relationships as it follows the disintegration of Florence and Edward’s short-lived marriage. *On Chesil Beach*, which opens on the couple’s wedding day, shortly after they have settled into their honeymoon suite on the Dorset coast, reaches a climax, “literally and figuratively” (91) as Janine Uttell notes, when the hapless Edward prematurely ejaculates over the naked body of his squeamish bride, and ends when, after an argument on Chesil Beach, the couple parts ways. Yet, despite the unambiguous account of the newlyweds’ failed attempt to consummate their marriage, which, as Mathews observes, “is delineated in painstaking detail during the course of the novel” (82), *On Chesil Beach* cannot be criticised for eroticising the Victorian era. Distinct from the nineteenth-century setting of its neo-Victorian counterparts, it examines contemporary society’s entrenchment in Victorian convention from a pre-liberated early twentieth-century setting when “[t]he Pill was a rumour in

the newspaper” and “good girls” were still “keeping themselves” for their future husbands (McEwan 39). It would only be later in the decade – 1963, if one is to believe Philip Larkin’s poem “Annus Mirabilis”, which identifies the year as the historical turning point in British attitudes to sex and sexuality – that the so-called Sexual Revolution would reach British shores. Tragically, like for Larkin who decries the belatedness of the Sexual Revolution, 1963 would also be “just too late” for the sexually incompatible Florence and Edward, who, on their wedding night in July 1962, unwittingly find themselves stuck on the dividing line between the more constrictive social climate that dominated England until the late 1960s and the ongoing shift towards a more liberal ideology that would challenge traditional attitudes towards women’s sexuality, pre-marital sex, homosexuality and freedom of expression (Larkin 54).

In *On Chesil Beach*, like his earlier novel *Saturday* (2005), McEwan appropriates Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” to comment on “humanity’s anxious relationship with history” (Mathews 83). In *Saturday*, which is set in London shortly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, Arnold’s poem features when the protagonist’s daughter, at the request of a violent housebreaker, recites “Dover Beach” and in doing so divert her attacker from his intentions of raping her. In *On Chesil Beach*, however, McEwan re-imagines Arnold’s poem in its depiction of Florence and Edward, who, like the speaker and his beloved in “Dover Beach”, find themselves beached on the threshold space between the loss of one set of values and the instatement of principles that would replace them. Alleged to have been written during Arnold’s honeymoon in 1851, “Dover Beach”, as Michael L. Ross observes, advocated “domestic intimacy and fidelity between individuals” as a “refuge from the collective angst” that resulted from England’s transitioning to a modern state (81). Social advancement and scientific discovery, such as Darwin’s theory of evolution, called into question long-standing British belief systems and drove England towards a modification of mores, the reverberations of which culminated in the Sexual Liberation Movement more than half a century later. During the nineteenth-century, romantic love, in the context of marriage, was often proposed by Victorian authors like Elizabeth Gaskell as a means to restore order to a world that was undergoing unprecedented change. McEwan, however, subverts the faith in marriage as a unifying power. Unlike the romantic solidarity that Arnold suggested as a stabilising force in a world of uncertainty that “[h]ath really neither joy, nor love, nor light/[n]or certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain”, Florence and Edward do not find refuge in being “true [t]o one another” (*Poems* 242).

Instead, as the novel progresses, Florence and Edward, whose marriage serves as a metaphor for the uneasy relationship that exists between the past and the present, come to view one another as a “monstrous, perverted” ‘other’ when they are unable to reconcile their different marital expectations and sexual needs, as Uttell observes (94). “Swept with confused alarm of struggle and fight”, as they become aware of their conflicting sexual needs, the innocent Florence and Edward become the personification of what in “Dover Beach” is described as “ignorant armies who clash by night” (*Poems* 243).

It can be argued that the third-person omniscient point of view in *On Chesil Beach*, which allows access to both Florence’s and Edward’s most private thoughts, reveals a link between the couple’s incompatible attitudes to sex and marriage, and the books they read. Earl G. Ingersoll points out that, “although McEwan offers no evidence that [Edward] had read [D.H.] Lawrence’s novel”, much of Edward’s attitude to sex, including his “preoccupation with the full range of sexual experience”, reflects that of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), which, after the lifting of the ban on forbidden material in England in 1960, gained a cult-like following among “college students” like Edward (134). Lawrence, who wrote his novels at the peak of the anti-Victorian period, “[i]n his attempts to free his generation from the inhibitions that were inhibiting desire”, as Ingersoll explains, “raised the expectations of many men [...] that sexual fulfilment was possible for all”, particularly in a loving relationship, and that “desire and love ought to be equal in intensity and frequency” (135). This is certainly true for Edward who awaits his wedding night with “eagerness – for rapture, for resolution” (McEwan 7). Marriage, for the inexperienced Edward, is closely linked to what he has been conditioned to view as “a boundless sensual freedom, theirs for the taking [...] [;] a dirty, joyous, bare-limbed freedom [...] where [he and Florence] would weightlessly drift upwards in a powerful embrace and have each other, drown each other in waves of breathless, mindless ecstasy” (McEwan 96). However, when his unrealistic expectations of sexual fulfilment are not met on their wedding night, Edward is left feeling disappointed, frustrated and misled by Florence, whom he demonises as deceptive in the argument on Chesil Beach that finally ends the relationship:

You tricked me. Actually, you’re a fraud. And I know exactly what else you are. Do you know what you are? You’re frigid, that’s what. Completely frigid. But you thought you needed a husband, and I was the first bloody idiot who came along. (McEwan 156)

The more conservative Florence, who does not share in her husband's vision of wedlock as a certain sexual liberty "even blessed by the vicar" (McEwan 96), finds the "prospect of entanglement and flesh" revolting (McEwan 9). When confronted with Edward's unwanted sexual attention, Florence's observation that "there was nothing that she could do, beyond fainting" (McEwan 27) reflects an attitude to sex typical to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels in which the sexually inexperienced heroine, like in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, faints whenever confronted with a suitor's unwanted sexual attention. Florence's aversion to sex is further reinforced by what is ironically referred to as "her modern, forward-looking handbook that was supposed to be helpful to young brides" (McEwan 7). With its medical jargon and euphemisms "that almost made her gag" (McEwan 8) it closely resembles a combination of Acton's writing on female sexuality and the nineteenth-century conduct book. Ironically, in the same year that McEwan places Florence and Edward's marriage, the American author Helen Gurley Brown published the new type of advice manual *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), which contested the idealisation of connubial sex, and changed the way sex manuals for women would be written in the future. As a modification of the Victorian medical manuals that upheld virtuous femininity and whose continual dominance in the twentieth century McEwan underscores in his reference to Florence's paperback guide with its "cheery tones and exclamation marks and numbered illustrations" (McEwan 7), *Sex and the Single Girl* with its plain-spoken discussions on sex that encouraged young women to gain sexual experience before marriage, was mostly aimed at unmarried women and discredited the notion that "a 'nice' single woman has no sex life" as "nonsense" (Brown 174). By observing that many 'nice girls' enjoyed sex before and outside wedlock, *Sex and the Single Girl* initiated a redefinition of femininity in which young women like Florence could shamelessly find pleasure in pre-marital sex.

On Florence and Edward's wedding night, however, this message of 'free love' as endorsed by Gurley Brown had not made its way into the British collective consciousness, which is unfortunate because, as Ingersoll speculates, "disaster might have been averted" (133). A better informed Florence might have sought, and perhaps found in *Sex and the Single Girl*, help for her "repugnance" of sex. Similarly, as Ingersoll notes, a more sexually experienced Edward might have known better than "foregoing [masturbation] for the week preceding the ceremony" (139), and in doing so avoided the mishap of "arriving too soon" (McEwan 7). Perhaps, a more sexually experienced Florence and Edward might not have been in such a rush to marry at all. However,

as Ingersoll observes, “[i]n 1962 – and not just in England – the options for a couple like Florence and Edward were fairly limited” (133). For most of the early twentieth century, decorum dictated that marriage precedes or immediately followed sexual intercourse, and it was therefore not unusual for couples like Florence and Edward to be “virgins [...] on their wedding night” (McEwan 3). Whilst this shows the on-going effect of the Victorian idealisation of sexual purity on modern norms and values, Ingersoll explains that “‘nice’ girls *didn’t* [emphasis in original] partly because the means of contraception were limited” (133). Condoms remained unreliable, and oral contraception, as is observed in *On Chesil Beach*, would be introduced in England only in 1963, when it was made available exclusively to married women up until 1967. Engaging in premarital sex thus meant taking the risk of conceiving a child ‘out of wedlock’, which was, as Ingersoll explains, “considered a huge social embarrassment, with even hasty marriages producing a ‘premature’ baby entailing some degree of social stigmatisation” (133). Heterosexual couples living together without some sort of connubial commitment therefore remained an uncommon practice, typically associated with bohemians, homosexuals and other marginalised communities. Wedlock, on the other hand, continued to be perpetuated as the romantic ideal and until late in the twentieth century signified the transition from childhood to adulthood that brought with it a rise in social respect and acceptance, similar to that which Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* found so appealing in a marriage with the annoying Mr. Collins. Ingersoll explains that “childhood was not a valued stage for [Edward and Florence’s] generation, and the young were encouraged to abandon the imperfect state of childhood as quickly as possible to become responsible adults” (133). So it is for Florence and Edward who initially embrace marriage, “gleeful that their new status promised to promote them out of their endless youth” and render them “free at last” (McEwan 6). However, their newfound sense of freedom is transitory when, in the few hours between their arrival at their honeymoon hotel in Dorset and Florence’s impulsive return to her parents’ house, it becomes evident that “[t]heir personalities and past, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement and experience or easy manners, then the tail end of religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and [finally] history itself” have left the newlyweds ill-equipped for their roles as husband and wife (McEwan 96).

Mathews notes that in order for the reader to understand the “critical impulse at work” in *On Chesil Beach* it is thus necessary to “trace the genealogy of McEwan’s story further back from



the 1960's to its deeper roots in the Victorian era" (83). Like traditional neo-Victorian fiction, the notion of contemporary society as the "product of a complex past" (83) is central to *On Chesil Beach* and a close reading of the text reveals that McEwan is deeply invested in the "wider effect of the [Victorian] past on the present" (Mathews 83). Despite being set more than half a century after Queen Victoria's reign, McEwan's novel is, as Mathews observes, "peppered with numerous examples of how [the Victorian era] affects and shapes the lives of [the] characters" (84). Not only can the ever-present Victorian past be observed in the immediate surroundings of their honeymoon suite – "the four-poster bed, rather narrow, whose bedcover was pure white and stretched startling smooth" (McEwan 3), "the formal meal [served] in silver dishes on candle-heated plate warmers" (McEwan 4); "the Elizabethan farmhouse [that] was 'reorganized' in the mid-eighteenth century" (McEwan 12) – but it soon becomes clear that their courtship and eventual marriage, which Edward describes as having been "a pavane, a stately unfolding, bound by protocols never agreed or voiced, but generally observed" (McEwan 21), is haunted by Victorian convention which manifests throughout the novel in several ways. Perhaps the most significant of these Victorian 'ghosts' is the social protocol that prevented open and honest discussions of sex. In the opening lines of *On Chesil Beach* it is explained that Florence and Edward "lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible" (3). This phenomenon, which can be traced back to the Victorian era, when, as stated in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, "even between husband and wife the intimacy was governed by the iron laws of convention", is illustrated by Florence's and Edward's thoughts as they sit silently, eating their dinner together in their honeymoon suite (301). When finally left alone for the first time, as man and wife, the sexually inexperienced couple secretly worry about the consummation of their marriage as "the moment when their maturity would be tested, when they would lie down together on the four poster bed and reveal themselves fully to one another" (McEwan 6). However, unequipped to "describe to each other certain contradictory feelings" (McEwan 6), both of them remain "bottled up with all the things they [do] not know how to say or dared not do" (McEwan 96). Florence, in particular, dreads the instant when she will have to submit to her new husband's "close embrace, she preferred no other term" (McEwan 7) as engaging in sexual intercourse has been a longstanding fear of hers. However, what soon becomes apparent is that while Edward "merely suffered conventional first-night nerves" of "arriving too soon" (McEwan 7), Florence's anxieties, it is hinted but never confirmed, are

caused by sexual abuse suffered during the sailing trips that she took with her father when she was “twelve and thirteen” (McEwan 50). Associating sexual activity with the violation of her “composure and essential happiness” (McEwan 7), Florence does not want to be “entered” or “penetrated” as her sex manual suggests, as the mere thought of being sexually intimate with Edward, or any other man for that matter, fills her with a “visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as sea sickness” (McEwan 7). However, in 1962, like the Victorian age in which Ellen Ash lived, these were matters “beyond words, beyond definition” (McEwan 21). McEwan reminds his readers that Florence’s reality is a world where the “language and practice of therapy, the currency of feelings diligently shared, mutually analysed were not yet in general circulation” (McEwan 21). As a result, nothing that Florence considered sexual and thus private “was ever discussed” (McEwan 21), not with Edward and also not with her “physically distant” (McEwan 55) mother whom she considered “an old-fashioned blue stocking” (McEwan 10), or her friends whom she dared not “trust [...] with a secret” (McEwan 11). Alone, with no one to turn to, and with frank sex manuals such as *Sex and the Single Girl* not yet on British bookshelves, all Florence has in the way of wisdom is her cheery “paperback guide” (McEwan 11) for young brides, which with its Victorian euphemisms fails to provide the vocabulary she needs to express her fears. It is this absence of language, her inability to voice the “unutterable” to Edward, for “what could she have said, what possible terms could she have used when she could not have named the matter to herself”, that leads to the escalation of the events on their wedding night and subsequent annulment of their marriage (McEwan 9).

Florence is not the only character in *On Chesil Beach* that suffers from a lack of language. In the closing lines of the novel, a geriatric Edward regretfully contemplates his own obstinate silence that rendered him passive during the fateful argument on Chesil Beach that entirely changed the course of his life. It is only in his sixties that the proud Edward is ready to admit to himself that he had “never met anyone he had loved as much [as Florence]” (McEwan 166) and, during his last days, he is haunted by questions of how different his life could have been, believing that “he would have been more focused and ambitious about his own life” with Florence by his side (McEwan 166). However, his decision to stand in the “cold and righteous summer dusk, watching her hurrying away from him” instead of having “called out to Florence, [and] gone after her” (McEwan 166) meant that Edward “locked him and his new wife out of a future they might have shared” (Ingersoll 132). Ingersoll explains that the notion of a momentary decision –



in Edward's case, the decision to say or do nothing – holding the power to redirect an individual's path, is not unique to *On Chesil Beach* (132). In *Atonement* (2001), one of McEwan's earlier novels, the central character's over-active imagination leads her to falsely accuse her sister's boyfriend of rape, an act of deception that would eventually lead to the lover's demise during World War II, and direct the central characters own life path and work as a writer, as she writes an alternative ending to their narrative as a means to atone for the damage her lie has caused. However, what McEwan seems to suggest in *On Chesil Beach* is that, as a product of one's social environment, an individual's decisions are largely directed by the cultural norms of his or her particular milieu. Edward, even if he was not as proud, would not have been able to reconcile his relationship with Florence because, as McEwan reminds his reader, on their wedding night in 1962, "there existed no shared language yet in which two sane adults could describe" matters such as premature ejaculation or incest to each other (McEwan 139).

Florence's and Edward's respective upbringings play an important role in their attitude to sex and marriage. Like Margaret and Thornton in *North and South*, Florence and Edward come from different socio-economic backgrounds. In Gaskell's novel, the growing affection between Margaret and Thornton unifies them, despite their different backgrounds and because the novel ends shortly after they get married, it is assumed that they live happily ever after. *On Chesil Beach* subverts the notion of marriage as an agent of unification of love that also underpins "Dover Beach" by highlighting the aftermath of Victorian class conflict that continued to provide obstacles for marriages like Edward's, who comes from a "squalid" (McEwan 37) lower-middle class home in Chiltern Hills, to Florence, who grew up as the daughter of a rich factory owner in a "large Victorian villa" (McEwan 111). Ingersoll explains that, because Edward's life, much like *North and South's* John Thornton, has been an "education in how to behave like his social betters" (136), he does not believe it is appropriate to share the "vital information concerning his 'contribution' to the wedding night" with his sensitive wife (140). Yet, in Edward's social circle, even if it is only in "dirty jokes and wild anecdotes", relative openness about sexual matters exists. This is not true for Florence. Her strained relationship with her well-to-do parents and their "rather objectionable opinions" (McEwan 54) made Florence adept at "concealing her feelings" (McEwan 50), a quality that would prove detrimental to her relationship with Edward. Furthermore, the demarcation of feminine space in the Pointing family home, in which Edward is assigned to the "small room, on the top floor, chastely remote from Florence's bedroom"

(McEwan 111), together with her “prim hostel for female students where the light went out at eleven and male visitors were forbidden at any time” (McEwan 40) has made it near impossible for the couple to gain any sort of sexual experience before wedlock. However, where Edward’s sexual inexperience can be accounted for due to lack of opportunity, Florence’s distaste for sex is covered up by the ideology of angelic femininity, which, as Niahm Baker observes, endured in post-war Britain, “especially [in] the decade of the 1950s” (1). Edward, who has “had a fairly long history of engaging with Florence’s shyness”, has “come to respect it, even revere it”, believing it to be “part of the intricate depth of her personality, and proof of her quality” (21). However, when Florence’s reticence, much to Edward’s disappointment, continues after marriage and he accuses her of “carry[ing] on as if it’s *eighteen* (emphasis in original) sixty-two” (McEwan 144) he is not far from the truth. Similar to Acton’s description of Victorian middle-class women’s attitude to sex, Florence is not “very troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” and “would far rather be relieved from [her husband’s] attentions” (Acton 101). For the naive Florence, as was believed of many virtuous middle-class brides before her, there is little connection between sexual desire and romantic love. She does not experience “the hot, moist passion she has read about” (McEwan 9); we can only speculate that she may have read Edward’s copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and, although Florence “loved cuddling [Edward], and having his enormous arms around her shoulders, and being kissed by him [...], she disliked his tongue in her mouth” or the idea of herself being touched “down there” by someone else, even someone she loves (McEwan 8). Her attitude to motherhood, which McEwan describes as follows, further testifies of Florence’s Victorian middle-class outlook on marriage:

[H]er squeamishness did not extend to babies. She liked them; she had looked after her cousin’s little boy on occasion and enjoyed herself. She thought she would love being pregnant by Edward, and in the abstract at least, she had no fears about childbirth. If only she could, like the mother of Jesus, arrive at that swollen state by magic. (McEwan 8)

Like the nineteenth-century female that Acton claimed “seldom desires any sexual gratification for her herself [,] [s]he submits to her husband, but only to please him, and [...] for the desire of maternity” (101), Florence’s love for Edward is, for the most part, nonsexual. Her assertion that she loves him “sometimes like a daughter, sometimes almost maternally” (McEwan 6) calls to mind the idealistic pre-marital notions that Dorothea has of Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. Yet,

Florence is not ignorant of what is expected of her as a wife, but she is convinced that sex with Edward “could never be the summation of her joy”, only the “price she must pay for it” (McEwan 9). It is this Victorian “sense of duty” (McEwan 32) to her husband, whom “[s]he could not bear to let [...] down” (McEwan 33), that on their wedding night impels Florence to propose to Edward that “they could go and lie on the bed” (McEwan 27), despite dreading the act to which her suggestion might lead. Throughout the whole process of sexual foreplay, the increasingly distressed Florence reminds herself that Edward represents a “comforting broth of warm emotions, a thick winter blanket of kindness and trust” (McEwan 87). However, when Florence’s ill-advised act to “guide the man in” (McEwan 104), as suggested by her paperback guide, results in Edward accidentally ejaculating over her naked body, a horrified Florence experiences it as a betrayal, further intensified by the memories it evoked from her childhood. It should be emphasised that McEwan’s depiction of sexually traumatised Florence is not intended to affirm Victorian notions of the non-desiring female. Rather, *On Chesil Beach* comments on Victorian convention that rendered sexual abuse as a shameful secret that the victims had to hide from the world. Florence has suppressed the memories of her childhood abuse. Yet, the “starchy odour [of Edward’s semen] dragged with it the stench of a shameful secret locked in musty confinement” (McEwan 106), evoking “memories she had long ago decided were not hers” (McEwan 105) leading to her loss of self-control. What follows is a scene that resembles the wedding night of Ellen and Randolph Ash in *Possession*. Like Ellen, Florence, when finally confronted with her husband’s sexuality, is “incapable of repressing her primal disgust” (McEwan 105). Utell observes that in his naked, post-coital state, “Edward becomes increasingly monstrous and ‘other’ to Florence; she regards him through the dark lens of perversion, and his body and its desires make him strange to her” (101). Although Florence does not regress to the “running creature, crouching and cowering in the corner of the room” (Byatt 459) like Ellen does on her and Randolph’s wedding night, Florence’s “frantic” (McEwan 106) attempts to get rid of the caked semen on her body after which she flees the “claustrophobic honeymoon suite” (Utell 91) result in the Mayhew marriage, like the Ash marriage, being left unconsummated.

Ingersoll notes that, with the narrative focus predominantly on Florence’s sexual repugnance, it is easy to miss Edward’s part in the disastrous wedding night, brought on by his own sense of guilt, particularly about masturbation (141). Like “millions of men”, Edward “has been encouraged that sexual gratification is only meaningful in a loving [...] conjugal relationship”,

Ingersoll explains (135). However, in his lower-middle class social circle, where “the men had to be content with the telling of dirty jokes, uneasy sexual boasting and boisterous camaraderie driven by furious drinking, which reduced further their chances of meeting a girl” (McEwan 40), Edward, “[l]ike most young men of his time, or any time, without an easy manner, or means of sexual expression” (McEwan 20), indulges in self-pleasuring. Edward was born “too late in the century, in 1940” to believe Victorian myths that discouraged masturbation such as that his “sight might be impaired, or that God watched on with a stern incredulity as he bent daily to task [,] [o]r even that everyone knew about it from his pale and inward look” (McEwan 20). Nevertheless, due to the ongoing stigmatisation of the act, masturbation for Edward is closely linked to “a certain ill-defined disgrace, a sense of failure and waste, and of course, loneliness” (McEwan 20); emotions which manifest in anger when after arriving too soon, the “hysterical” Florence “scrambled to her knees, snatched a pillow from under the bedspread and wiped herself frantically” before fleeing the room (McEwan 106). The subsequent break-down of their relationship enables Edward’s break from sexual conservatism. As the sixties progress, the newly divorced Edward’s attitude to sex would change dramatically. It is revealed that his new life, separate from Florence, would be filled with “new excitements and freedoms and [...] numerous love affairs” and that he “wandered through those brief years like a confused and happy child reprieved from a prolonged punishment, not quite able to believe his luck” (McEwan 160). This newly discovered sexual freedom also influenced Edward’s outlook on other aspects of daily living and it is revealed that his youthful dream of “serious scholarship” (McEwan 161) were replaced by more exciting, in-the-now endeavours such as the “administration of various rock festivals”, assisting with the start-up of a “health-food canteen in Hampstead”, writing “rock reviews for a small magazine and becoming a “part-owner of a record shop” (McEwan 161). After a “series of chaotic, overlapping sequence of lovers”, Edward does eventually marry a woman but the marriage lasts only three and a half years (McEwan 161), after which he leads a mundane existence, living alone in the cottage that was his childhood home, “play[ing] cricket for Turnville Park” and attending a “historical society in Henley” (McEwan 164). Little is revealed about Florence’s life after Edward, apart from the fact that the quartet of which she was the first violinist had a “triumphant debut at Wigmore Hall in 1968” (McEwan 162) and remained eminent as a revered feature of the classic music scene (McEwan 163). In the 2018 cinematic remake of *On Chesil Beach*, Florence marries a cellist, the numerous children and

grandchildren serving as evidence that she has overcome her sexual phobia. The film deviates from McEwan's novel with its bitter-sweet romantic ending at which a visibly aged Edward attends Florence's final concert before she retires from the Ennismore Quartet. In the novel, however, it is revealed that Edward "would never attend the concerts", nor did he "want to see [Florence's] photograph" because he preferred to "preserve her as she was in his memories" (165). They never meet again after they part on Chesil Beach. The observation that Florence, after the Ennismore Quartet's debut, "could not help her gaze travelling to the middle of the third row, to seat 9 C" of the concert hall where Edward, once upon a time, promised to support his wife in her musical ambitions, adds to the tragedy of the failed marriage plot (McEwan 163).

At the close of *On Chesil Beach* Edward comes to represent the 1960s, while McEwan continually draws attention to Florence's Victorian qualities. As Mathews notes, "Florence's name, too, calls to mind Florence Nightingale, the woman who revolutionized the profession of nursing and features prominently as one of the "eminent Victorians" chronicled by Strachey", reinforcing this "tacit association between Florence and the Victorian age" (Mathews 84). In *Eminent Victorians*, Nightingale is depicted as a woman who, "beneath her cool and calm demeanour" concealed a "fierce and passionate fire" particularly for her work that, according to Strachey, bordered on obsession (Strachey 169). McEwan's Florence, with her equally "cool" and "calm" (McEwan 16) "north-Oxford proprieties" (McEwan 96), seems to share this character trait with her namesake. Whilst "clumsy and unsure" (McEwan 15) in other areas of her life, it is revealed that "when the business was music, she was always confident and fluid in her movements" (McEwan 15): "the undisputed leader [who] always had the final word in [the quartet's] many musical disagreements" (McEwan 15). Florence's "fierce professional ambition" (McEwan 122) as first violin often "kept her by her stand" and in a "trance-like" (McEwan 123) oblivion to those around her as she practices for hours on end, often sighing "over some imperfection of tone or phrasing and repeat a passage over and again" (McEwan 122). Prior to marrying Edward, her ambitions are simply to "be with [Edward], look after [him], be happy with [him], and work with the quartet, and one day play something, something beautiful for [him], like Mozart, at the Wigmore Hall" (McEwan 155). By the end of the novel, we learn that Florence's wish to spend the rest of her life with Edward never comes to pass. Her commitment to the Ennismore Quartet and dedication to her music career do, however, pay off, as illustrated by the review of the *Times* critic that "welcomed the arrival of 'fresh blood, youthful passion to

the current scene” (McEwan 162) and singles out its leader: “Miss Pointing, in the lilting tenderness of her tone and the lyrical delicacy of her phrasing, played, if I may put it this way, like a woman in love, not only with Mozart, or music, but with life itself” (McEwan 162).

The question that needs consideration is whether Florence’s success as a violinist would have been at all possible if the marriage succeeded and she indeed “looked after” (McEwan 155) Edward and raised his children. Today it is understood that Florence Nightingale’s success was possible only because she did not have a husband and children that nineteenth-century societal norms would have required of her to prioritise. This is also true of female novelists such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Emily Dickinson and Byatt’s fictional Christabel La Motte, whose unmarried, childless state allowed them the time to devote themselves to their career. In the hundred years between 1860 when Nightingale first laid the foundations for what would become the first secular nursing school in the world and the 1960s when Florence Pointing and her female peers had much more freedom to pursue a career of their choice, significant progress was made. Yet, one disparity which feminist endeavour, despite many attempts, has not been able to correct, even to this day, is the unequal division of domestic duty between husbands and wives. A NatCen social research report on “British Social Attitudes” published in 2013 reveals that although the typical Victorian attitude that “there should be a clear gender divide, with men taking on the role of breadwinners while women function home-keepers, has been almost eradicated” (Park 121) and British “women’s participation in the labour market continues to rise” (Park 116), gender equality in terms of “who does the bulk of the chores and who is primarily responsible for looking after the children” has made very little progress (Park 134). In a 2012 survey of British couples where each of the partners was doing the same amount of paid work, 63 per cent of women said that they were doing more than their fair share of housework, whilst only 15 per cent of men said that this was the case for them (Park 130). This estimate would have been even higher for Florence’s generation. What is disconcerting is that “gender inequalities at home” (Park 123) such as the “double shift”, where women are kept responsible for doing a paid job and the bulk of the family care and household chores” (Park 134), makes it very difficult to “achieve gender equality in the workplace” (Park 123). Often the onus rests on women to make career sacrifices in order to create satisfactory environments for their families. This would most likely have been true for Florence too. In the cinematic portrayal of *On Chesil Beach*, this reality is overlooked in its idealised portrayal of



Florence successfully juggling a musical career, marriage and children. McEwan's original novelistic version, which emphasises Florence's successful career without granting her a romantic happy-ever-after, thus seems a more realistic portrayal.

Florence is not the only one who would have been required to make career sacrifices should the Mayhew marriage have succeeded. Remnants of Victorian gender ideology and its rigid notion of manliness also threatened Edward's vocation. Before meeting Florence, Edward had numerous professional aspirations such as "applying for a doctorate, if his degree was good enough" (McEwan 45) or, as Mathews note, like Strachey, writing a "series of short biographies [on] semi-obsured figures who [ironically like him] lived close to the centre of important historical events" (45). In a more "realistic mood", Edward even considers finding a "proper job" where he would, similar to Matthew Arnold who held a lifelong position in education, teach history in a grammar school (McEwan 47). However, as the daughter of a rich factory owner, Florence's upper-middle class background has equipped her with what Edward views as a natural talent, "some womanly osmosis" (McEwan 17), for determining what is considered proper by societal norms and values, and this dominates not only the decision making involved in their wedding celebration (McEwan 7) but also where and how they would live, who their close friends would be, and in particular where Edward would work (McEwan 6). As a result, "many months before the wedding, [Florence's father], at her suggestion, offered Edward a job" (McEwan 17) in his firm. Whether Edward "really wanted" the job, which would be completely unrelated to his studies in History, or "dared refuse it [...] was another matter" (McEwan 17). Finding himself in a situation which is remarkably similar to Charles Summerson in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, whose wealthy future father-in-law offers him a position at his firm, Edward, like many Victorian gentlemen before him, experiences the obligation to provide for his bride, and it is this societal pressure to be the breadwinner and thus do what is 'right' and 'proper' that motivates Edward to cast aside his dream of becoming a historian and accept the job offer at hand. It is only after the "divorce on the grounds of non-consummation" (McEwan 160) and "a formal letter to Geoffrey Pointing, chairman of Pointing Electronics, regretting a 'change of heart'" (McEwan 160), that Edward is finally free to cast away his predetermined responsibility as breadwinner and pursue a career of choice, if not as a historian then as an owner of three records shops. And yet, the "sense of failure and waste, and of course, loneliness" (McEwan 25) that marked Edward's youthful attempts at sexual self-gratification, characterizes



his life's work. It is revealed that Edward never fully realised his potential: his "modest achievements were mostly material" (McEwan 163) as he had "drifted" through life, "half asleep, inattentive, unambitious, unserious, childless, comfortable" (McEwan 163). The insinuation that Edward, should he have remained married to Florence, "might have been more focussed on his own life" (McEwan 165), perhaps even "written those history books" (McEwan 165), seems to affirm the fictional idealization of the married state "as an imaginative necessity for the fully experienced life" (Boone 6). Yet, what differentiates *On Chesil Beach* from the traditional Victorian novel is its emphasis on the need for marriage malleability. The Mayhew marriage comes to an abrupt end because in spite of his progressive taste in music and literature, Edward, contrary to Roland in *Possession*, is too blinded by convention to even consider Florence's suggestion to "love, and set each other free" (142). It is only later that Edward would come to the realisation that Florence's "strange proposal" (McEwan 160) of an open marriage was not "quite so ridiculous, and certainly not so disgusting or insulting" (McEwan 160) as he initially believed it to be. In fact, under the new circumstances brought on by the modification of British mores, Florence's proposal to live by their own rules and standards "appeared liberated, and far ahead of its time, innocently generous an act of self-sacrifice" – a testament to Florence's love for him – that Edward, at the time, had "quite failed to understand" (McEwan 161).

When Matthew Arnold wrote "Dover Beach", modern advancement was viewed by many as a threat to Britain's social order. Premised on the nineteenth-century social construct of "separate spheres", domestic relationships were idealized as a safe inner sanctum from a world that Arnold and his Victorian peers experienced as daunting and uncertain. As is typical of neo-Victorian fiction, *On Chesil Beach* dispels this nineteenth-century myth. Even marriage, as the story of Florence and Edward illustrates, is not fail-safe against external societal forces. McEwan revisioning of "Dover Beach" forms part of a genre of historiographical fiction that as Mark Llewellyn in "What is neo-Victorianism?" explains "open up aspects of our present to a relationship with the Victorian past that offers new possibilities of simultaneously thinking where we come from" (171). Not only does *On Chesil Beach* demonstrate the "impact of nineteenth century and its enduring legacy in the [post-Victorian] present" (169) but by suggesting that evolutionary change should be embraced instead of resisted, McEwan allows for an alternative view to Gaskell's novel that, for example, upholds companionate marriage as a means to reinstate an ideological status quo. Throughout the centuries, marriage in the western

world has continued to modify itself according to changing social standards, and this evolutionary quality of marriage, it can be argued, is perhaps the very reason why the institution of wedlock continues to exist at all. However, in the twenty-first century, much like Florence and Edward in the twentieth century, contemporary notions of wedlock continue to be haunted by Victorian ideology. Despite Bloomsbury, the Sexual Liberation Movement and feminist activism, nineteenth-century marriage ideology continues to shape the way we think about our romantic relationships. McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, unlike Patricia Park's *Re Jane*, that will be discussed in the following chapter, does not contest the idealisation of marriage as the "individual's one true source of earthly happiness" (Boone 9), but what it does seem to suggest is that in order for marriage to survive as an institution, it must be adapted to suit the needs of the people that enter into the institution. For Florence and Edward, this might have taken the shape of open marriage, which goes directly against the Victorian ideal of monogamous wedlock. For many others it might require a change of legislation that allows homosexual marriage. In the end, Edward and Florence's greatest failure is not their sexual performance – or the lack thereof – on their wedding night, but their inability to embrace change and, as Utell notes, "recognise otherness in a loving and ethical way" (91).

## CHAPTER 3

### **Bildung and Betrothment: Rethinking the Role of Romance and Female Self-Actualisation in Patricia Park's *Re Jane***

Elaine Hoffman Baruch explains that the bildungsroman, which has retained its popularity since the nineteenth century, centralises “the education of the [protagonist] who is brought to a higher level of consciousness through a series of experiences that leads to his [or her] development” (335). However, Boone notes that a “general distinction can be made between the function of the love-plot in male and female stories of maturation” (74). In the typical male bildungsroman, he explains, a romantic plot line culminating in marriage, if at all included, merely serves as a “kind of narrative scaffolding upon which to hang the various independent concerns, the innumerable events, of the hero’s growth to adulthood and social integration” (Boone 74). The romantic relationship in female coming-of-age stories, by contrast, functions as the “primary means of educating and developing the [female] self”, as Baruch shows (341). The notion of female growth as “synonymous with the action of courtship” can be traced back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic fiction, in which, Boone points out, “the climactic event of marriage confer[red] on the heroine her entire personality (as wife) as well as her social vocation (as mother)” (Boone 74). In spite of changes in sexual mores and values, contemporary popular romance, through its copying of traditional narrative structures that centralise the (hetero)sexual relationship as a pivotal component of the heroine’s development, perpetuates Victorian notions of marriage as women’s primary objective. Even in literary fiction, coming-of-age narratives in which the female protagonist achieves subjectivity “outside the strictures of some form of the age-old love story” are rare, which is also often the case in neo-Victorian fiction (Boone 137). Despite its critical re-evaluation of Victorian gender ideologies, the neo-Victorian novel’s emphasis on transgressive sex as enabling female self-empowerment has often resulted in the replication of limiting literary conventions in which the female protagonist’s growth, like that of the Victorian heroine, remains “inextricably linked” to the romantic relationship (Baruch 357). Patricia Park’s *Re Jane* (2015), an adaptation of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) set in contemporary New York and South Korea, implicitly challenges popular romantic appropriations of this novel. While it differs from neo-Victorian adaptations such as Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which foregrounds the narrative voice of Rochester’s first wife, *Re Jane* performs a

similar critical revision of the novel by suggesting correspondences between contemporary traditional Korean and Victorian constructions of femininity (65). As a “counter-narrative” (Boone 2) which explores the persistence of the Victorian marriage plot from a twenty-first century setting, *Re Jane* does not conform to the conventional plot structure in which the female protagonist’s growth occurs “in or on the periphery of marriage”, as Baruch formulates it (Baruch 335). Nor does it restrict its protagonist’s character development to what Inmaculada Pineda Hernández and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz describe as a “subversive sexualised kind of agency” (9). Instead, through a process of what Boone term “form-breaking”, *Re Jane* subverts Brontë’s original plot structure which concludes in matrimony by permitting its female protagonist “an independent life beyond the saga of courtship and the settlement of marriage” (282).

Hillary M. Schor observes that since its publication in 1847, *Jane Eyre* has been “taken seriously as both a literary and social document” and continues to be “central to modern and postmodern rethinking of Victorian gender questions” (173-174). Its unconventional critique of Victorian England’s sexist gender constructs contravened nineteenth-century novelistic conventions that made it mandatory for the female-authored text to reflect the “feminine values that [Victorian society] exalted”, as Showalter explains, setting the course for writers like Patricia Park to challenge the subservient social position of women (7). In the trajectory of its orphaned protagonist’s development from an impoverished governess to a financially independent bride, Brontë’s bildungsroman departed from the conventional portrayal of Victorian middle-class women as “angelic beings who could not feel passion, anger, ambition and honour”, Showalter points out (79). Instead, in an environment where women were instructed to find “the command of duty and the delight of service, sufficient, in fact ennobling, boundaries for their lives”, as Schor describes it, *Jane Eyre* delivered a “powerful message of revolt” against the restrictions imposed on women by a patriarchal society that curtailed female education and confined women to the domestic sphere (173). Jane Eyre’s resistance to the social limits imposed on her results in a journey of self-actualisation that breaks from the typical Victorian female bildungsroman in which protagonists seldom left the safe confines of the Victorian family home. Baruch explains that, like the “male hero of the bildungsroman, [Jane] grows by going out in the world, on her own” (341). As a ten-year-old girl, Jane is sent from her Aunt Reed’s estate to a charity school

for orphaned girls where she receives a limited education that equips her to earn a living as a governess while having to endure “starvation” (Gilbert and Gubar 365), “indoctrination” (Gilbert and Gubar 375) and unjust punishment. It is while employed as the governess at Thornfield Hall, where she educates Adèle, the daughter of Rochester’s former mistress, that a discontented Jane famously rejects the sexist gender constructs that defined women as passive angels by exclaiming that “women suffer from too rigid restraint, to absolute stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; [...] and that it is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them, if they seem to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex” (Brontë 155). Jane’s journey of self-becoming, as Baruch points out, “seems to be a reversal of more usual literary tradition” when, refusing to be Rochester’s mistress after finding out that he is married to a madwoman in the attic, she takes on the role of active heroine by embarking on a “solitary journey” that brings her to Marsh End where she discovers her connection with the Rivers family and earns a living as a teacher (340). The knowledge and experience Jane gains, enable her to assert herself in a patriarchal world. Her autonomy is augmented when she becomes the heiress to a small fortune, which grants her the financial freedom to reject what would have been a loveless marriage to her cousin, St. John Rivers. Yet, despite being “remarkable for [her] boldness in crossing borders throughout the novel”, as Schor observes, Brontë is unable to foresee a fate for her unconventional protagonist that goes beyond the traditional denouement that ends in wedlock (174). Baruch explains that whereas “a traditional sign of manhood lies in the hero’s ability to give up guides” (338), the “test of womanhood” (338) is measured by the heroine’s ability to find a man who is both financially and intellectually “superior” (348). This pattern is observable in all of Austen’s novels, as well as traditional Victorian novels like *Bleak House*. Susan Lyndon observes that in *Villette*, published six years after *Jane Eyre*, Brontë would succeed in “reshap[ing] gender roles more definitely” in its depiction of the unmarried protagonist Lucy Snowe, who is content in earning her own living from the school she opens after her fiancé, Monsieur Paul, disappears at sea (28). In *Jane Eyre*, however, the idealisation of marriage as the “fulfilment” of the female “quest for independence” and “demands for equality” (Schor 174) that occur in the closing chapters, when Jane enters into what is represented as an egalitarian marriage with the widowed and maimed Rochester, not only conform to the conventional plot structure where the heroine “turn to marriage to achieve the goal of romantic

individualism” but it is inconsistent with the novel’s critique of the patriarchal limits imposed on Victorian middle-class women (Baruch 340).

Rhys’s neo-Victorian novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, highlights some of the contradictions in Brontë’s romantic ending that as Boone observes “glosses over the inequities [...] concealed in the institution of marriage itself” (9). Set partly in the British West Indies during the nineteenth century, *Wide Sargasso Sea* deviates from the conventional narrative structure of the female bildungsroman exemplified by *Jane Eyre* by focussing on the disintegration of the life of Rochester’s first wife, the Creole heiress, named Antoinette Cosway in Rhys’s novel. Married for her wealth, which is transferred to Rochester upon marriage according to nineteenth-century marital law, Antoinette becomes, as Schor observes, “vulnerable to violence, imprisonment and cruelty” (175). The first-person narrative reveals that her insanity is partly due to her husband’s mistreatment of her and not, as Rochester suggests in *Jane Eyre*, sexual excess and alcohol abuse (Brontë 557). Not only does he have sex with one of the servants during their honeymoon, after which he isolates Antoinette from her family and friends by taking her away from the home she loves to England, but when he insists on calling her Bertha, the name of Antoinette’s mother who suffered a mental breakdown after her son died in a fire set by former slaves to their home, it leads to a loss of identity. Trapped in an emotionally abusive marriage, with no financial means to escape from her adulterous husband, as Victorian marital law determined that everything a woman owned became her husband’s in marriage, Antoinette, like her mother, suffers from an emotional collapse and is secretly locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall for close to a decade. In Brontë’s novel, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, Bertha is depicted as a “not-yet human Other” (247) who Jane Eyre describes her as a violent “savage with a “discoloured face” and rolling “red eyes” (Brontë 541). Jane’s entry into an egalitarian marriage with Rochester, whom she claims to feel “akin to” (Brontë 332) and thereby fulfilling her journey of female Bildung, is premised on Bertha “set[ting] fire to the house and kill[ing] herself” (Spivak 251). *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as Spivak points out, “keeps Bertha’s humanity, indeed her sanity as a critic of imperialism intact” (249). It is insurrection against her oppressors – and not “innate bestiality” – that “prompts [Antoinette’s] violent reactions” (Spivak 250). When at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* she plunges to her death, she is not “sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s

consolidation” as she is in *Jane Eyre*, as Spivak notes (241). Rather, death becomes the only way she can escape imprisonment in marriage and in the marriage plot.

As its title suggests, *Re Jane*, like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, re-imagines Jane Eyre as it negotiates the terms and conditions for romance and female development in a contemporary, global context that does not subscribe to what Meghan Jordon defines as the “appropriat[ion] of the affiliative love relationship to complete the [female protagonist’s] journey towards selfhood” (86). Set in the twenty-first century, *Re Jane* breaks from the typical neo-Victorian setting as it follows its protagonist’s journey of self-becoming from North America to South Korea and back again. Yet, in spite of its contemporary setting, *Re Jane* continues with the neo-Victorian practice of revisioning the past as it steers away from narrative structures that, in Liora Brosh’s words, “rejuvenate [...] the marriage plot, [and] represent [...] it as feminist” (141). As is typical of the post-modern subgenre, *Re Jane* makes use of what Hutcheon describes as a playful, ironic, “intertextual linking of the past to the present”, not only to reinforce its relationship to *Jane Eyre*, but also to highlight the similarities between the Victorian middle-class feminine ideal and contemporary South-Korean constructions of femininity (28). In doing so, Park unsettles what Antonija Primorac defines as the “supposition that re-visionings and re-writings of Victorian literature are taking place merely within the cultural and administrative reach of the former British Empire” (49-50).

One of the main themes in Park’s “global neo-Victorian” (Primorac 50) novel is *nunchi*, a Korean term which cannot be directly translated into English but which refers to “the ability to read a situation and anticipate how you [are] expected to behave” (*Re Jane* 5). In an interview with Steph Cha for the *Los Angeles Times*, Park observes that South Korean hierarchal society parallels Victorian society to a certain degree, as it is “very scripted”, explaining that *nunchi* as a “governing principle of Korean [culture]” provides a code of conduct that determines how women in particular should behave, dress and approach their career paths (Cha n.pag.). Initially, the protagonist Jane Re, who, like Jane Eyre, is an orphaned outsider, follows, as Park explains, “this specific code of social behaviour as she tries to make her way through the world” (Cha n.pag.). However, as the daughter of a Korean mother and an American father who was brought from South Korea to Queens, New York, to live with her uncle and his family in “the second-largest Korean community in the Western world”, Jane Re struggles to conform to the patriarchal



gender ideals that dominate her social environment (Park 19). Similar to her Victorian namesake, who decries nineteenth-century patriarchal gender constructs, the social restraint that South Korean culture places on its women leaves Jane Re feeling *tap-tap-hae*, the Korean term for “an overwhelming discomfort pressing down on you physically, psychologically” (Park 8). It is only when she takes her friend Eunice’s advice to “[l]ose the *nunchi*” that Jane finally begins her journey towards self-actualisation (Park 16).

In Brontë’s novel, the female protagonist’s journey toward selfhood begins when Jane Eyre, as a ten-year-old child, is sent away to Lowood School where, despite having to endure harsh conditions, she is granted the rare opportunity at an education that enables her to work as a governess. In Park’s novel, however, readers are introduced to Jane Re after she has graduated from college. Despite having obtained a degree in finance and thereby being granted career options that Victorian middle-class women were previously denied, a comparison is drawn between the rise of the machine that curtailed job options for women living in Victorian England and America’s unstable economic environment that limits young women of Asian descent like Jane Re, to pursue a career of her choice. Unable to find a work in the field for which she is qualified, Jane is forced to consider other, less well-paid employment opportunities typically ascribed to women. Unwilling to continue at her Korean uncle’s family-run grocery store where she has worked under strict rule since childhood, Jane Re breaks from Korean custom that dictates that women should remain in their family home until married when she accepts the only other job she can find, working as a live-in au pair to Ed Farley, his eccentric academic wife Beth Mazer, and their adopted Chinese daughter Devon. At 646 Thorn Street, a Brooklyn brownstone rendition of Thornfield Hall, Jane Re soon finds her “once hyperactive *nunchi* dulled” (Park 50) by the “ebullien[t]” Beth, who, serving as a modern-day version of Bertha, takes it upon herself to school Jane in feminism (Park 264). However, similar to Jane Eyre’s growing love for Rochester, Jane Re falls in love with the much older Ed over intimate late night conversations around the kitchen counter which leads to an extra-marital affair in which she “g[ives] him (sort of) [her] virginity” (Park 184). Jane Re’s entry into a sexual relationship with a married man breaks from Brontë’s novel in which Jane’s refusal to become Rochester’s mistress upholds the virtuous feminine ideal. Yet, unlike the redefining qualities that neo-

Victorian erotic plots typically attribute to transgressive sex, Jane Re's first-person narrative reveals the furtive experience to be uncomfortable, confusing and disappointing.

Lydon explains that when Jane Eyre learns that Rochester is already married and thus "cannot make her his legal wife, she is forced to turn to the outdoors to prevent becoming Mr. Rochester's mistress and compromising herself in her own eyes, and in the eyes of polite society (26). In *Re Jane*, however, the female protagonist's decision to leave Thorn Hill is motivated by the guilt she feels for "betraying" Beth and Devon (Park 314). When Jane Re observes that "[she] could have salvaged the thin shreds of Ed and Beth's marriage, the thin shreds of [her] dignity", Park does not refer to female virginity, as is often upheld in nineteenth-century fiction as a signifier of the heroine's worth (Park 119). Rather, Park redefines the lack of dignity as Jane's inability to recognise the damage that her decisions cause to the other female members of the Thorn Hill family. This lack of dignity is further emphasised when Jane impulsively abandons Devon, who as a modern-day version of Adèle, has come to rely on Jane as a friend and mentor, by using her Korean grandfather's deathbed as an excuse to escape from the unflattering role of "homewrecker" (Park 119). While in South Korea, Jane's struggle for self-becoming continues despite living with her doting Aunt Emo, who as an unmarried fifty-year old Korean woman loves Jane as her own daughter. Unlike her literary predecessor, who is endowed with what the Victorians believed is a 'natural' trait of female moral superiority, Jane Re struggles to assert herself in a world where the lines between right and wrong are less clearly defined. When she befriends a group of Korean classmates, nicknamed after the popular American sitcom *Friends*, Jane Re secretly finds herself in a romantic rivalry with Monica and Rachel, who serve as Korean counterparts for Jane Eyre's cousins, Maria and Diana Rivers. Contrary to the amity that exist between Jane Eyre and her cousins, Jane Re's friendship with Rachel and Monica is marked by an undercurrent of jealousy and competition as all three girls vie for the affection of Chandler, or Changoon, as the St. John Rivers figure is known in *Re Jane*. Having the upper-hand, Jane enters into a sexual relationship with Changoon despite being aware that Monica has been in love with him for quite some time. Yet, when the increasing pressure to conform to the "hyperfeminine" ideal of South Korean society becomes intolerable, Jane breaks her engagement to Changoon and quits Korea, only to return to the arms of the newly divorced Ed Farley when she arrives in New York (Park 166).

Diverging from Brontë's novel, which concludes soon after Jane Eyre announces "Reader, I married him", Jane Re and Ed do not live happily ever after (Brontë 861). Instead, the novel digresses from the typical contemporary take on the Victorian romantic denouement that, as Brosh notes, "almost always end[s] in the happy marriages between liberated women and sexually respectful idealized men" (15), when Jane, who finds herself in an emotionally abusive relationship with the increasingly "condescending" (Park 269), "jealous" and "controlling" Ed, terminates their love affair (Park 304). The novel's ending, which is a playful mimicking of the epilogue that characterises nineteenth-century novels, gives an overview of several romantic unions: Changoon marries Jane's friend Monica, Emo gets engaged to a much older divorcee and the eccentric Eunice who breaks from Korean custom when, instead of settling for a traditional ceremony, she exchanges vows with her long-term boyfriend in a Star Wars-themed wedding. Yet Jane, who following her break-up with Ed has focussed her energy on starting her own business, remains unmarried, finding fulfilment in her career, close-knit family ties and mended female friendships instead, thereby challenging the traditional female bildungsroman's supposition that a "loveless life is an incomplete one", as Jordan observes (79).

The rejection of the romantic recuperation of the Rochester figure in *Re Jane* thus works as a continuation of the demystification of the marriage plot that occurs in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In an interview with Margaret Zamas-Monteith for the online magazine Necessary Fiction, Park explains that she, like Rhys, considers Brontë's hero a "hugely problematic character", not only because of his cruel treatment of 'the mad woman in the attic' as revisioned in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but also because of his deceptive dealings with Jane Eyre (Zamas-Monteith n.pag.). Alluding to the scene in Brontë's original text when, on the day that she is supposed to get married to Rochester, Jane Eyre finds out that he is already married to a madwoman who is locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall, Park observes that "all the delicious tête-à-tête in the world can't make up for the fact that [Rochester] tried to trick a woman he loved into becoming his mistress", an act that Park describes as an "unforgivable betrayal" (Zamas-Monteith n.pag.). Viewing Rochester as an "older, richer and more powerful man that takes advantage of young, earnest, trusting women", Park replicates these features in her own rendition of Brontë's hero (Zamas-Monteith n.pag.). With his physical appeal that is likened to the "conventional handsome features of the male models in the Polo ads" (Park 22) and hands-on approach, both in the

kitchen where he cooks up “epic dinners” (Park 293) and the woodwork bench, Ed, who is seemingly representative of the contemporary masculine ideal of ‘metro-man’, initially evokes sympathy from readers for being married to what Jane Re describes as an “insufferable wife” (Park 315). However, as the novel progresses, Ed is revealed to be unkind, selfish and despotic. The similarity between the Rochester figure in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Ed is best illustrated when, like his counterpart who fornicates with one of the servants “behind the thin partition which divided [them] from [Antoinette’s] bedroom” (Rhys 109), Ed attempts to cheat on Beth in the attic office she considers to be her “retreat from the nonsense of the world” (Park 61).

The failed sexual encounter, which calls to mind the disastrous honeymoon night in *On Chesil Beach* when Ed rushes off after he fails to maintain an erection, leaving the inexperienced Jane naked, alone and confused on “Beth’s dusty office” floor (Park 126), does not follow neo-Victorian convention in which “erotic fulfilment [...] merge[s] with feminist triumph” as Brosh argues (15). Rather, by portraying the Rochester figure as impotent, *Re Jane* parodies the sexually dominant Byronic hero who continues to populate the pages of popular romance. Typically, romantic love in traditional Victorian novels serves as an agent of transformation that turns less-than-decorous Byronic heroes like Rochester, who previously resorted to what in Brontë’s novel is described as the “road to shame and destruction”, into a suitable partner for romance (199). *Re Jane*, however, refrains from romanticising the adulterous Ed. In its depiction of Ed and Jane’s relationship that goes “beyond the expected close and into the uncertain realms of [relationship] stalemate and impasse”, to quote Boone, *Re Jane* reveals a continuation of Ed’s disagreeable conduct (18). Not only is he a disappointing sexual partner, but, like Rhys’s Rochester figure, Ed isolates Jane from her friends and family, including her uncle Sang and his family (Park 286-287). Initially Jane, who has always had a complicated relationship with her uncle Sang, fails to question Ed’s authority and, “starved for love”, clings to Ed who she believes to be “the first man [she had] ever known to show [her] kindness” (Park 320). Her co-dependence on Ed is amplified by emotional abuse that is camouflaged as love declarations, such as “you think that there’ll always be people out there who’ll love you?” and “[n]o one will ever love you more than I do” (Park 320). However, as Jane grows more independent, she begins to question “whether [she] relie[s] too heavily on Ed’s account of things, rather than seeing for [her]self” (Park 296). A defining moment in Park’s novel is when Jane proves mature enough to

recognise Ed's emotional abuse and ends the relationship, a resolution which leaves Jane feeling "light, buoyant, [f]ree" (Park 321) and, above all, empowered. Park's parodic appropriation of Jane Eyre's exclamation "Reader, I married him!" (Brontë 861) when Jane Re triumphantly announces her liberty, stating, "Reader, I left him!" (Park 321) suggests that its protagonist's growth is measured not by entering into marriage but by her ability to free herself from an unsatisfactory romance.

The shift in *Re Jane* from a narrative structure that glorifies the romantic hero coincides with the novel's focus on the role that non-sexual relationships play in female development. Jane Re's uneasy relationship with her uncle Sang is an example of a personal connection that allows the heroine growth outside the boundaries set by the marriage plot. Described as "a man of his generation" (Park 287), Sang, who similarly to Rochester was sent away by his father to live in North America shortly after the 1950s Korean War, personifies the patriarchal convention that continues to govern the behaviour of the Korean inhabitants of Queens. Monosyllabic, seemingly unaffectionate, dismissive of "outside" influences (Park 288) and "too-quick temper[ed]" (Park 34), he enforces strict prescriptions of *nunchi* – "no back" talk [...] no act like you are special [...] [no] ask stupid question" (Park 6) – according to which Jane is raised. *Nunchi* dictates that Jane must obey Sang whenever he "barks [...] orders" (Park 115) and "put aside [her] own desires and opinions in favour of his" (Park 115). However, as the novel progresses, Jane finds it increasingly difficult to submit to the social expectations of patriarchal Korean culture as dictated by her uncle. Comparable to Jane Eyre, who, as an impoverished orphan in her Aunt Reed's household and later as a governess at Thornfield Hall, tries to find her place in a world where she is neither a servant nor part of the family, Jane Re struggles with issues of identity in a community which is known for its ethnic homogeneity and whose prejudiced attitudes towards her as an orphaned, "mix-blood" illegitimate child she has to endure (Park 18). In Brontë's bildungsroman, marriage serves as the resolution that secures Jane Eyre's social position when she marries Rochester and finds fulfilment in her role as wife and mother. Park, however, deviates from a plot structure that, as Jordan notes, "privileges [romantic] love" as a means to "alleviate [the female protagonist's] dislocation from the modern world" (79). Instead, Jane Re's path towards self-actualisation closely resembles masculine versions of the bildungsroman in

which the protagonist's growth entails a "process of socialisation that extends beyond the strictures of marriage" (Boone37).

One of the first steps that Jane takes on her path to self-becoming is when she defies her uncle's wish for her to study at one of America's "name-brand colleges" by completing her tertiary education at the less prestigious Baruch instead (Park 52). Jane's decision is based on a combination of her proud refusal to ask Sang for the tuition fee, and her reluctance to "saddl[e] [her]self with all that [study] debt" (Park 40). However, when Sang finds out, he is furious, and he comes to view Jane as "bound for [a] lesser path" (Park 41). In "Building Your Resume to be the Ultimate Bride: South Korean Women's Contradictory Identity in a Hyper-Instrumentalized Society", Yunhee Roh contextualises the prominence that Sang places on his niece's tertiary education. Roh notes that, unlike the role that higher education has come to play in contemporary western notions of female self-actualisation, "attending a specific school" (198) is regarded as a "virtue" (209) comparable to nineteenth-century accomplishments that form part of Korean women's "systematic preparation for marriage" (198). In South Korean culture, traditional gender roles, as prescribed by the feminine ideal of *hyongmo yancha* or 'wise mother, good wife' which, like 'angel in the house' ideology, rules women's "primary function as homemaker and child care taker" remains dominant (Roh 200). As a result, marriage is largely viewed by South Korean society as a vocation in itself and continues to be pursued by Korean women as their "ultimate life goal" and "final career destination" (Roh195). A tertiary education simply functions as an element of "resume building" that is believed will help young Korean females to realise their goals of marriage and motherhood which is considered to be women's "final career achievement" (Roh195-196). The term *ch'whichip* refers to the custom among a young generation of college-educated South-Korean women who, despite having completed university degrees, either "from the start, have no intention of getting a job and rely solely on putting themselves on the marriage market" or simply "quit their jobs after marriage so that they can fully devote themselves to marriage and motherhood" (Roh198). Such is the case for Sang's wife Hanna, whose primary role as the typical Korean housewife is to serve as her husband's helpmeet. Hanna cooks and cleans, and when she is not tending to their children, she helps Sang with menial tasks in his grocery store. Similar subservience is expected from Jane. It is taken for granted that she, like other South Korean women, will accept traditional Korean gender roles

“without much conflict” because, as Roh explains, in a society where women’s value is closely linked to their marital state, “gender biased marital norms allow [married] women to gain respect in society, and thus power and filial piety” (204).

Roh explains that South Korea’s “left over women”, as those who fail to secure their social position through wedlock are referred to, often suffer from “miserable solitude” comparable to that of the Victorian spinster (231). Like the unmarried Victorian women who had to endure stigmatisation as “redundant” (Poovey 1) women who did not live out their so-assumed, God-given purpose in life as wife and mother, single Korean women are often marginalised in a close-knit community where unmarried women are excluded from social circles to which married women belong (Roh 207). They also hold subservient positions in their own family homes (Roh 207). The distinction that is drawn between Hannah and Sang’s unmarried sister Emo illustrates the disparity that exists between married women and their unmarried peers. Unlike Hannah’s active social life – she is “always darting off to some church function [o]r gye gathering [a money-lending club that she and Sang] joined as an excuse to get together with their friends” (Park 178) – Emo leads a lonely existence. As a fifty-something unmarried woman, she lived in her father’s house until he passed away, and now occupies the role of housekeeper in her oldest brother’s home where she, despite working a “pretty standard eight to six at her late father’s office [...] return[s] straight home [every night] to cook the evening meal for [her brother] and herself” (Park 138). When she is not fetching drinks for her brother (Park 138), Emo, who “never spoke of her friends, and no other plans seemed to occupy her evenings”, spends most of her evenings watching Korean soaps (Park 178). To prevent Jane from suffering a similar fate to Emo’s, Sang insists that his niece, as is the custom among young female Koreans, improves her chances at a secured social position and financial future in marriage by means of an esteemed college degree. Jane, however, refuses to submit to Korean cultural conventions that determine a woman’s worth by ‘virtues’ such as a tertiary education.

By choosing Baruch instead of Columbia as her alma mater, Jane curtails her marriageability by South Korean standards. Yet, like Lucy Snow in *Villette*, Jane’s “successful existence outside[cultural] convention” calls into question what Boone describes as “the viability of marital roles and arrangements” (Boone 19). It is not Jane’s marital status but her ability to rise to an independent business woman – a role for which Jane admits she is “indebted to [her] early



years at her uncle's grocery store" as it "proved to be a good training ground" (Park 333) – that gains her the respect of her Korean peers. Her success as the CEO of a "property management [company]" (Park 333), a traditionally masculine role, also earns her recognition from Sang, who is able to look beyond his own patriarchal prejudices when he, by means of a "stiff pat on the back" (Park 334), acknowledges that he is "proud that [Jane] started [her] own business" (Park 334). No longer viewing her as simply a helpmeet, Sang even goes as far as offering Jane a partnership in his expanding business. Although Jane declines Sang's offer, maintaining that she "need[s] to do [her] own thing" (Park 326), their relationship improves significantly, with Jane having a new appreciation for her uncle who, as a newly married young man, burdened with the illegitimate child of his deceased sister in a foreign country where he could hardly speak the language, made difficult personal sacrifices for the betterment of his family. Even though their relationship was difficult at times, marked by mutual "resentment [...] harboured over the years" (40), Sang "didn't simply give up [on Jane even] when it would have been the easier thing to do" (Park 285). This fatherly commitment of Sang to his niece contrasts sharply with that of Ed, who shows a general lack of concern for Devon's feelings by "humiliating her" and failing to "follow through" in his fatherly duties once he and Beth get divorced (Park 285). Sang's continual support, even after Jane achieves financial success, is illustrated by the role of business mentor and financial adviser that he takes on. It is with Sang's guidance that Jane is able to secure her financial future, not by marriage, but by making a property investment of the inheritance her grandfather left her and which she, for the duration of her relationship with Ed, left "sitting untouched in a bank in Seoul, slowly accruing interest" (Park 334), unlike Jane Eyre who by Victorian law is forced to relinquish her inheritance, and thus her economic independence, to her husband in marriage.

The Korean term *jung*, described as a non-sexual "deep seated regard" (Park 85) is considered to be a significant role-player in an individual's overall well-being and, as Christopher K. Chung and Samson Choo observe, often serves as the inspiration in Korean literature and art. *Jung*, as explained in *Re Jane*, can take on many forms. It can be used to refer to the kind of bond that formed equally between a parental figure and a child, like Sang and Jane (Park 86). It also describes attachments that develop between, for example, "a student and his beloved mentor" or "the dreadful mother-in-law [a woman] grows to cherish over time" (Park 86). In contemporary

popular culture, depictions of such non-sexual interpersonal relationships, particularly between women, remain uncommon. The trajectory of the *jung* that develops between Jane and Beth despite their initial relationship as romantic rivals thus sets *Re Jane* apart. What Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) describes as the “incredibly impoverished” (70) nature of modern western literature where depictions of “two women [...] represented as friends” (69) are scant, and female protagonists “almost without exception [...] are shown in their relation to men” (69) can be traced back to the Victorian novel. Typically the heroine of nineteenth century romances has to compete with other women for the partner of her choice. When she proves herself more virtuous than her romantic rivals, she is rewarded with a happy marriage that concludes the novel. *Re Jane* subverts the conventional plot structure, like Brontë's original text, where the female protagonist achieves success and happiness to the detriment of other female contenders. The growing respect and appreciation that develop between Jane and Beth, addresses what Roxanne Gay describes as the “cultural myth that all female friendships must be bitchy, toxic, or competitive” (48).

Park, much like A.S Byatt in *Possession*, pokes fun at academia by reimagining ‘the mad woman in the attic’ as a women studies scholar who, in her attic office, writes dissertations on “misunderstood and demonized characters in nineteenth-century novels” (Park 62). She explains that “[i]n Beth Mazer [she] wanted to create a character who seems crazy, at least to Jane, but who she starts to read with new and empathetic eyes” (Cha n.pag.). The reader is first introduced to Beth through “the eyes of Jane”, who has lived a very “sheltered life” in her uncle's home and has “never been exposed to someone like [Beth]” (Cha n.pag.). Yet, despite representing the antithesis of Jane's patriarchal uncle, Beth, like Sang, is guided by a set of “arbitrary rules” (Park 71) which she well-meaningly imposes on others. Not only does Beth limit her family to a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet but, acting on “genuine concern” (Park 65) for her au-pair's well-being, “foist[s] her academic feminist readings” (Park 223) on Jane, who she believes would benefit from a schooling in such theory. Jane, who is forced to listen to Beth's “endless lectures on womanhood, motherhood, wifehood” (Park 314), secretly views her “crazy feminist boss” (Park 223) as an adversary with whom she has to compete for Ed's affection, and pays little attention to Beth's mentoring. To justify her growing sexual attraction to Ed, Jane *Re*, demonises Beth, as is evident in the description of her “gaunt [face] with yellow circles under her large eyes”,

“frizzy strands” of grey hair and “blackheads [that] studded her nose]” that calls to mind Jane Eyre’s portrayal of Bertha Mason (Park 25). She also makes fun of Beth’s “life behind her back”, a betrayal of their friendship that Jane later, as she matures, considers to be even “worse than sleeping with [Beth’s] husband” (Park 314-315).

Jane’s initial rejection of Beth’s tutelage is further emphasised by the “regression of feminism” (Park 193) that occurs when, upon arriving in South Korea, she conforms to what is described as the “Seoul girl’s polish” (Park 166), the custom among South Korean women to “always look [their] best each time [they] leave the house” (Park 171). In Korean, the word *sseng-ul* (Roh 210) or “raw [face]” (Park 168) is used to refer to a woman who does not wear any makeup. Roh explains that in a country where physical appearance is viewed as the “embodiment of female identity” (Roh 210), appearing with a “raw [face]” (Park 168) in public is not only frowned upon, but holds the power to affect a woman’s agency (Roh 210). *Re Jane* explores this phenomenon. When Jane goes for her first interview in Seoul, she has the experience of being overlooked by the interviewer who, without even considering her credentials, rejects her application. From Emo, Jane later learns that it is because her face was “raw” (Park 168). For the remainder of her stay in South Korea, Jane religiously wears the makeup that Emo buys her, despite the fact that the “layer of foundation coating [her] face felt *tap-tap hae*” (Park 171), mostly because her confidence increases as her appearance ‘improves’, and she comments on the “intoxicating quality” (Park 171) to “fe[eling]men’s eyes follow [her] as [she] walks down the street, and s[eeing]women young and old frown at her with a hint of jealousy” (Park 171). Jane’s new ‘polished’ look also lands her a relationship with Changoon; a handsome, ambitious, diligent and tall man who is representative of the Korean masculine ideal. Facing competition for Changoon’s affection from her ‘friends’, Rebecca and Monica, Jane, when around her boyfriend, feels the need to “step up [her] game” (Park 192). As a result, she spends hours “in front of the mirror” perfecting her makeup or trying on different outfits, “until resolving to buy a new one right before [their] date” (Park 193). However, as her relationship with Changoon progresses, the “pressure to look pretty at all times” (Roh 210) in order to “impress her boyfriend” (Park 193) becomes insupportable and, guided by the recollection of Beth’s lectures – “[y]ou don’t need to pander to the male gaze” (Park 96) and “[y]ou are *not* an object of desire” (Park 96) – Jane terminates the relationship and quits South Korea. Back in America, Jane does not persist with

the gruelling regime of “ris[ing] an hour earlier to fix [her] face at the vanity table with unwavering concentration” (Park 171). Nor does she revert to the opposite extreme as represented by Beth, who likens make-up to “modern-day bound feet” (Park 170). Instead, Jane learns to find a balance where she saves “makeup for special occasions only” (Park 265) while otherwise breaking from the South Korean custom by going out in public with a “bare face” (Park 265).

It is only when she steps into the role as mentor to Devon, with whom she had rebuilt a relationship during the course of her romance with Ed, that Jane fully realises what a significant role Beth played in her own personal development from an insecure girl to a woman who no longer feels the need to beautify herself in order to compete with other women. When Devon, now a teenager herself, struggles with issues of identity as a Chinese adoptee living in America, Jane is able to pass on the knowledge she has gained from Beth in order to help Devon on her own path towards self-becoming. Regretful of the “damage” that she has caused to the woman who “had welcomed [her] into her home and [from whom she] had taken everything that was [dear to her]”, Jane takes measures to mend her relationship with Beth, who after finding out about Jane and Ed’s affair, asserted the legal power her Victorian counterpart never had, by divorcing her adulterous husband. The reinstatement of Beth and Jane’s friendship does not happen immediately. There is an instance in *Re Jane* where Beth tells Jane “to get the *fuck* out of [the] house” that she had kept after the divorce, thereby asserting her own position as the rightful owner of Thorn Hill who, unlike Bertha Mason, will not be sacrificed for the happiness of the protagonists (Park 315). With time, however, Beth comes to appreciate the role that Jane plays in Devon’s life. Observing that “some things are worth salvaging” Beth and Jane set the past behind them and the novel conclude with their friendship restored (Park 317). Little is revealed about Ed apart from the fact that Beth “worries about his financial state” (Park 335) indicating a certain financial impediment, oppose to the blinded and maimed Rochester’s physical impairments. Yet neither Beth nor Jane takes on the self-effacing, angelic role exemplified by Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale who jeopardise their own financial freedom for their romantic partners.

Showalter observes that numerous novelists, like Park, have re-written the “story of Jane Eyre” with endings that “Brontë could not have predicted” (223). Yet, within the “boundaries set by the feminine novel”, an ending to *Jane Eyre* in which “Jane and Bertha leave Rochester and go off

together” would be, as Showalter explains, “unthinkable” (124). *Re Jane*, however, defies the limits of traditional plot structures that continue to inhibit contemporary female fiction, with a revisionary ending in which Beth and Jane takes an active co-parenting role in Devon’s growth towards maturity, Jane providing Beth with much appreciated “emotional support” as they set off together for China to find Devon’s birth mother (Park 336). By emphasising non-sexual interpersonal relationships as an agent of female growth, *Re Jane* deviates from the typical narrative structure in which the development of the self through some sort of romantic connection remains to be, as Baruch observes, the “most striking characteristic” of the female bildungsroman (335). The emphasis on heterosexual relationships as the primary means of obtaining self-actualisation in contemporary fiction has resulted in what Brosh describes as an “utopian ideal of feminist triumph” that, similar to traditional Victorian novel, risks “consol[ing] and conceal[ing] the harsher, more complex realities not only represented in the novels but also experienced, perhaps, in the lives of contemporary female audiences” (Brosh 141). Left unquestioned, romantic novelistic ideology can potentially be quite dangerous, even life-threatening, as illustrated in Alice Hoffman’s *Here on Earth*. However, by engaging in the neo-Victorian practice of rewriting classic Victorian fiction, *Re Jane* allows for a critical revisioning of nineteenth-century novelistic gender ideology that continues to shape the way women in the twenty-first century view themselves and their romantic relationships.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Until Death Do Us Part: Desire and Domestic Violence in Alice Hoffman's *Here on Earth*.**

From film adaptations to best-selling trilogies like Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005 – 2008) and E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* (2011 – 2012), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) has inspired a plethora of contemporary revisions in which the violent passion between central characters, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, is misinterpreted as the archetypal romance. Diverging from Brontë's novel in which Heathcliff, after being prevented from marrying Catherine, degenerates into a villainous abuser of women and children, contemporary *Wuthering Heights*-inspired romances typically rely on the traditional Victorian plot structure that emphasises romantic love as an agent of transformation in which the dark and dangerous Byronic hero is transfigured into a loving, devoted husband and father. Janice A. Radway explains that in popular romance, male aggression is depicted as “sexually attract[ive]” but not “threatening to women” because as the narrative concludes, the hero's “overly aggressive masculine behaviour is exposed as a false or defensive facade that, when removed, as it inevitably is, reveals the true male personality to be kind and tender” (168). Alice Hoffman's *Here on Earth*, like *Re Jane*, subverts the romantic portrayal that contemporary readership as come to expect from adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*. As part of a subgenre of literature that partakes in the neo-Victorian practice of rethinking and rewriting Victorian narratives from a post-Victorian setting, *Here on Earth* challenges readings of *Wuthering Heights* in which masculine dominance serves as a signifier of romantic devotion, as it reveals the “problematic violence against women cloaked with the romantic [heterosexual] relationship” in these novels, as noted by Amy E. Bonomi et al (2). By following the “counter-traditional” plot structure identified by Boone, Hoffman's appropriation of *Wuthering Heights* goes beyond typical romantic closure to expose the impact that the model of obsessive romantic love deriving from Brontë's novel continues to have on women's lives (2). *Here on Earth* takes a feminist stance in its revisionary approach to the original novel as Hoffman portrays the complex questions of domestic violence in *Wuthering Heights*, through its exploration of Victorian ideology, described in Brontë's novel as “fabulous notions [...] and false impressions” of romance that continue to make women vulnerable to abuse (186).

When *Wuthering Heights* was first published in 1847, Victorian readers were shocked by the incestuous passion between Catherine Earnshaw and her adopted brother Heathcliff, an element that contemporary adaptations tend to centralise. They were also disturbed by the “grim portrayal of domestic violence”, which served as a “powerful blight” on the “conventional depiction of nuptial bliss”, as Judith E. Pike explains, an aspect of the novel generally ignored by romantic rewrites of it (349). Like Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), which calls the Victorian conjugal ideal into question by revealing the lived reality of Britain’s marital laws devised to protect marriage but failing to protect married women, *Wuthering Heights* presents a disquieting depiction of abuse and imprisonment at the hand of the Byronic hero. Joyce Carol Oates accordingly describes *Wuthering Heights* as an “anomaly” among traditional nineteenth-century novelistic portrayals of the Victorian family home as a safe, peaceful refuge (449). Nineteenth-century romantic fiction’s employment of the Byronic hero coincides with a plot structure in which it is the “heroine’s task to decipher his personality and then to alter his reckless and rebellious demeanour so that they can have a mutually satisfying love relationship”, A. Bog and Janet M. Ray argue (430). Once the hero is “captured” by the one woman who knows how to bring out his more personable side, the novel ends in wedlock or the promise thereof (Bog and Ray 430). In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, for example, Rochester’s relationship with Jane Eyre is the catalyst that transforms him from a would-be bigamist to a devoted husband and father, as noted in the previous chapter. Similarly, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, the growing affection that factory owner John Thornton develops for the altruistic Margaret Hale, motivates him to take a more humanistic approach to his working-class employees. Margaret and Thornton’s marriage symbolises the union between the assumed female predisposition for charity and the masculine world of business as a means to restore order to a world that is constantly threatened by socio-economic change. *Wuthering Heights*, with its “grotesque narrative of its inter-familial rivalries and revenge plot”, as Lyn Pykett puts it, subverts the traditional Victorian novel’s companionate ideology (87). When Catherine marries her neighbour Edgar Linton, because Victorian class barriers determined that it would “degrade” (Brontë 99) her to marry Heathcliff, whom she fervently proclaims to be part of her “own being” (Brontë 201), love becomes a destructive force leading to violence, death and subjugation. Deprived of emotional fulfilment when she chooses the material gain and class alliance that Edgar has to offer above the “wholeness” of being that Heathcliff’s represent, according to



Gilbert and Gubar, Catherine falls violently ill and later dies from childbirth (265). Similarly, when Heathcliff is refused by Catherine and thus denied the transformative power of love, he deteriorates into a violent antihero whom Catherine herself identifies as a “fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (Brontë 126). Determined to wreak revenge on those he holds responsible for this loss of Catherine, he elopes with Catherine’s sister-in-law, Isabella Linton, whose sentimental misapprehension of him as a “hero of romance” renders her blind to her role in his plans to ruin her brother, Edgar (Brontë 186). As Mrs Heathcliff, Isabella becomes “Edgar’s proxy in suffering” (Brontë 179) until “bruised”, “scratched” and fearing for her life, she escapes from her confinement in the abusive marriage (Brontë 211). The master-slave relationship that characterises Heathcliff and Isabella’s marriage is replicated in his relationships with the rightful heirs to the Earnshaw and Linton households, Hindley, Hareton and Cathy, who fall victim to Heathcliff’s violent temper when he kicks, slaps, threatens and berates them. As Arnold Shapiro notes, he uses “force and trickery” to usurp Hindley Earnshaw’s position as the master of Wuthering Heights (291). When Hindley dies, Heathcliff, as revenge for the abuse he suffered under his brother, deprives his nephew Hareton Earnshaw from an education, with the goal that he would grow up to be an uneducated farm worker instead of a gentleman. He also manages to trap Catherine and Edgar’s daughter, Cathy, into marrying his own dying son, Linton Heathcliff, a strategic move that allows Heathcliff to become the master of the Linton estate. Heathcliff’s plans to completely destroy his enemies never come to pass. Thomas Vargish points out that, when Heathcliff is prevented from marrying the woman he describes as his “life” and “soul” (Brontë 207) revenge becomes an “extension of his love” for Catherine (16). However, when this no longer proves to be satisfying, his passion for revenge becomes a passion for death (Oats 440). Haunted by Catherine’s ghost and longing to be reunited with her in the afterlife, Heathcliff wills himself dead, after which he is buried next to his beloved and, as Alison Case and Harry E. Shaw observe, “their spirits are freed from the trivial social bonds that held them apart” (60).

The developing relationship and subsequent engagement of the cousins Hareton and Cathy that concludes the second half of the double plot in *Wuthering Heights* serves as what Marianne Thormahlen describes as a “contrasting study of love” (196). Not only does the romantic denouement, as is typical of Victorian novels, restore domestic harmony after the chaos inflicted on the Linton and Earnshaw houses, but the “teacher-student” relationship that develops between

the cousins when Cathy teaches Hareton to read and thus restores the identity of which he has been cheated, was intended by Brontë as a model for egalitarian partnerships that could be applied both in the private and public sphere, according to Shapiro (285). Yet, contemporary readers seldom find the romance of Hareton and Cathy as interesting; they are often omitted altogether from adaptations of the novel, as Case and Shaw point out (66). Instead, it is readers' morbid fascination with "the brooding atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights* with its intense characters, and disturbing theme [of passion and violence]" – the same elements which originally repelled Victorian audiences – that has given Brontë's novel its cult status in popular culture, as Sarah McGuire observes (217). Numerous adaptations and rewrites of *Wuthering Heights* exist in which obsessive, possessive, even aggressive love, as exemplified by Heathcliff and Catherine, is presented as "alluring examples of male-female relations" that "contrast highly to the contemporary egalitarian [ideal]" that has become the norm since the publication of Brontë's novel, according to Bog and Ray (473). In Stephanie Meyers' best-selling series *Twilight* (2005 – 2008), which is known to have been inspired by *Wuthering Heights*, the forbidden relationship between female protagonist Bella and her vampire boyfriend Edward closely resembles the "grand passion" of Brontë's doomed pair (Oates 448). Bonomi et al., observes that Edward continuously displays possessive, even abusive behaviour towards Bella, which is normalised "within the context of romance" (2). The same is true for the relationship between female protagonists Anastasia Steel and her sadomasochistic partner Christian Grey in E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* (2011-2012) trilogy, that originated as fan-fiction of *Twilight* before it became a best-seller and box-office hit. In both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades*, which follow the conventional villain-to-hero transition that ends in marriage, aggressive behaviour serves as a signifier of the male protagonist's romantic devotion (Bonomi et al. 3). It is under the banner of the male protagonist's protective instinct that behaviour such as stalking, social isolation, emotional manipulation and assault, typically associated with Intimate Partner Violence, occur (Bonomi et al. 3).

Jane Urquhart's neo-Victorian novel, *Changing Heaven* (1990), challenges what Lucasta Miller identifies as the "modern myth" of *Wuthering Heights* as an archetypal love plot (vii). Her coming-of-age tale foregrounds the darker side of romantic passion in its depiction of the love-obsessed nineteenth-century parachutist, Arianna Ether, who joins Emily Brontë's ghost in haunting the Yorkshire moors when she plunges to her death after her lover, as a way of freeing

himself from the relationship, murders her by sabotaging her parachute. Arianna's narrative alternates with that of her twentieth-century counterpart, Ann Frear, who experiences a figurative fall from her *Wuthering Heights*-inspired romantic fantasies. Like the high percentage of women who, according to *The Guardian*, read romantic novels to "compensate for their own less highly-coloured love lives" (Martin Wainwright n.pag.), Ann sees *Wuthering Heights* as a "magical world of passion" in which she escapes the mundanity of everyday life, J. Russel Perkin explains (117). However, when she tries to replicate the melodrama of Brontë's novel in her personal love life, it results in a loss of "identity" and "independence", as Perkin points out (117). Ann's entrenchment in Victorian novelistic notions of romance leads her to construct the married, emotionally detached Arthur as the quintessential dark, mysterious and complicated Byronic hero (Perkin 123). Yet, when Arthur proves himself incapable of being a hero, Ann's failure to "remake the fictions of the past in [her] own image" leads to her being "controlled by them", finally resulting in an emotional breakdown (Perkin 116). As the novel progresses, Ann must thus learn to do away with *Wuthering Heights* as an instruction manual for romance before she can achieve the necessary self-actualisation to sustain an emotionally satisfying romantic relationship (Perkin 123). Following the conventional plot structure where female development is closely linked to romantic development, Ann's growth in *Changing Heaven* can be measured by her ability to "take control over the narrative process" when, instead of using *Wuthering Heights* as a "romantic formula", she begins to "write" her own love story, as Perkin argues (Perkin 116). The novel concludes with Ann entering into a more modern, intercontinental relationship with John, the Moor-edger. John, much Roland Mitchell in *Possession*, does not pose a threat to the female protagonist's autonomy. Deborah Deneholz-Morse observes that as the man who nurses Ann back to health after her break-up with Arthur, John more closely resembles the kind, loyal Hareton Earnshaw than the villainous, self-seeking Heathcliff (531).

The danger of permitting one's romantic expectations to be shaped by Victorian fictional ideals is also a key topic of exploration in *Here on Earth*, but Hoffman does away with the conventional happy ending that concludes *Possession* and *Here on Earth*. Transferring Brontë's story from England's Yorkshire moors in the 1780s to a small American town during the late 1990s, Hoffman re-imagines what might have happened if Heathcliff and Catherine reunited. Instead of sentimentalising the union, *Here on Earth* follows the relationship between March and Hollis, as they are named in Hoffman's modern-day retelling, beyond the typical romanticised

closure to reveal the (self-)destructive quality of blind passion. The novel opens with March and her daughter Gwen arriving in Jenkintown to attend the funeral of Judith Dale, the housekeeper who took care of March as a child. Twenty years earlier – the same amount of time that passes between Catherine’s death and Heathcliff’s reunion with her in the afterlife – March left Jenkintown when she married her next-door neighbour, the entomologist Richard Cooper, after her adopted brother/lover disappeared for three years in what would only later be revealed as devious attempts to secure a future for himself and March. Yet, time and distance have done little to stifle March and Hollis’s desire for each other. Diverging from the original plot structure, in which Catherine rejects Heathcliff as a romantic partner, March and Hollis enter into an extramarital affair, but it does not take long before romantic rapture leads to abuse. Desperate to hang on to his long lost love, Hollis manipulates March to move in with him, after which he isolates her from the outside world by stealing her mail, cutting the telephone lines, immobilising her car and thwarting her income. Hoffman refrains from romanticising controlling behaviour that Charmaine Power’s et al., in their study on romantic fiction and abuse, identify as predictive of Intimate Partner Violence (183). When Hollis’s jealous insecurity progresses to systematic mistreatment in the form of emotional, sexual and physical violence, *Here on Earth*, by granting readers access to March’s thoughts through focalised third-person narration, exposes how women in the twentieth century, much like their Victorian counterparts, continue to fall prey to abuse due to “blind inculcations of false notions of romance”, as Pike describes it (372).

Case and Shaw observe that “the story at the core of *Wuthering Heights* is to a large degree the story of Heathcliff: his status, character, and actions generate the conflicts that drive the narrative forward” (57). *Here on Earth* shifts the emphasis away from the Byronic hero to the female protagonist as Hoffman traces the psychological and physical deterioration that occurs when March enters into an abusive relationship with a man she believes to be “the love of [her] life” (121). Unlike Brontë’s nineteenth-century novel, in which Catherine is the only character that does not fall victim to Heathcliff’s physical abuse, March is not spared Hollis’s violent temper. When she leaves her kind-hearted husband for the dark, dangerous and sexually dominant Hollis, March, who is “much more passive than her Victorian counterpart” (6), as Rebecca Steinitz observes, comes to resemble the bruised and battered Isabella Heathcliff, following through on the prediction in *Wuthering Heights* that, had Catherine “trusted [Heathcliff], and assumed the [...] title of Mrs. Heathcliff, she would soon have presented a similar picture [of abuse]”

(Brontë 225). Comparable to what in *Wuthering Heights* is described as “fabulous notions [...] and] false impressions” (Brontë 186) that lead Isabella to misconstrue Heathcliff as a romantic hero, March clings to what Oates describes as “bookish expectations” that Hollis is a misunderstood Byronic hero who needs her to bring out his gentle, more affectionate side (443). However, Hoffman exposes as a dangerous fantasy the supposition that “underneath [a] very rough veneer, is a warm caring man”, a combination that is rare outside fiction, as Bog and Ray observe (461). Hollis, who is rumoured to have been responsible for the death of his wife Belinda, does not undergo the conventional villain-to-hero transformation in his affair with March. Instead, it is March who is transformed from a confident, financially independent woman who would not, as she puts it, allow “someone [to] boss [her] around” to a victim of Intimate Partner Violence (Hoffman 219).

Amy Carol Reeves explains that “healthy relationships are maintained by an inherent interplay between the self and the other in which there is both mutual recognition and self assertion”, whereas unhealthy relationships emerge when there is “a breakdown of mutual recognition” (16). She elaborates that, “when one partner in a romantic relationship refuses to assert self or to recognise the other as a separate being, erotic domination occurs” (Reeve 16). Such is the case with March, whose fiction-inspired fantasy that she and Hollis are “identical [at the] core” causes her to relinquish all control to him, resulting in an uneven power balance characterised by abuse (Hoffman 121). The belief in spiritual ‘oneness’ as the basis for romantic love predates the Victorian era, originating in 370 BC in Plato’s *Symposium* as a myth in which androgynous beings who had been cut into male and female halves by Zeus continue to search for completion in merging with their lost other half (520-528). In the seventeenth century, when companionate marriage emerged as a romantic ideal, this notion of man and wife being one in spirit and flesh was adopted by the church and state, serving as the basis for laws of coverture that deprived married women of their legal agency. The Victorian novel played a significant part in idealising the romantic ‘oneness’ between husband and wife, her role as caregiver and homemaker being complementary, albeit inferior, to his role as breadwinner. Yet, when Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine and Heathcliff’s incestuous passion, where Catherine famously claims of her adoptive brother that “he’s more myself than I am” in her observing that “[w]hatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (Brontë 99), served as what Boone describes “metaphoric expression of an alternative to reigning preconceptions of marriage as the union of

oppositely gendered, and hence inevitable antagonistic, factions” as can be found in novels like *Jane Eyre* and *North and South* (154). As brother and sister, Heathcliff and Catherine’s union is less “threatening” because their gender difference, as Boone explains, “is rendered second to their bond of blood-likeness, familiarity and friendship” (154). Boone points out that Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship is “remarkably free from the social constructs of masculinity and femininity” that can be found in more traditional Victorian novels (154). By ‘being’ Heathcliff, Catherine does not conform to the angelic ideal as exemplified by Margaret Hale or Jane Eyre. Rather, sharing his wild, untamed spirit, Catherine is a “defiant, unsubmitive anti-heroine” until she is forced to take on a double character as Edgar’s complimentary other (Boone 155). Hoffman’s novel, it can be argued, continues with the subversive stance in *Wuthering Heights* when it illustrates that even a romantic union between two people who grew up as brother and sister is not a failsafe against the unbalanced power relations that underpins heterosexual relationships. March’s inability to view herself as a “separate being” from her brother-lover becomes her undoing (Reeves 16). Instead of emotional fulfilment that the “bloodlike affinity” between Heathcliff and Catherine implies, March, in her merging with Hollis, experiences a complete loss of identity and independence, comparable to that of Ann Frear in *Changing Heaven* (Boone 169). Not only is her absolute co-dependence on Hollis incapacitating, where even the simplest of daily activities like “bathing or combing her hair [...] seems beyond her, somehow, small but impossible tasks” (Hoffman 213) but because March does not “think when she is with him, or make a decision, or state a preference” she fails to defend herself, resulting in her becoming a victim of abuse (Hoffman 174).

As *Here on Earth* illustrates, abusive behaviour in romantic relationships does not always involve physical violence. Maureen Outlaw explains that although tangible abuse accounts for the “majority of the scholarly attention to intimate partner violence, researchers have long acknowledged the existence, and, to a lesser extent, importance of the non-physical aspects of intimate partner abuse” (263). According to Outlaw, non-physical abuse, which includes social abuse in which the victim is isolated from family and friends, economic abuse such as “imposed economic dependence of the abused by the abuser”, and emotional abuse in the form of “comments and actions intended to undermine the victims self-respect and sense of worth”, are “often claimed by victims to be the worst of the abuse” due to its emotional damage that takes much longer to heal than “physical injury”(264). Yet, these types of abuse are often diminished



as “secondary, interchangeable risk factors or warning signs of physical abuse”, Outlaw points out (263). Hoffman foregrounds non-physical intimate partner abuse that is much more difficult to identify. In *Here on Earth*, Hollis never hits March. However, her emotional co-dependency on Hollis renders her blind to the emotional, social and economic abuse she suffers. What initially starts off as a subtle form of emotional manipulation when Hollis, like Ed in *Re Jane*, tells March that “[n]o one will ever love [her] the way [he] do[es]” (Hoffman 276), progresses to threats like “[n]o one can have you, if I can’t” (Hoffman 276) and emotionally abusive arguments in which Hollis berates March for inconsequential matters such as her “looking at him the wrong way” or “interrupt[ing] his work” (Hoffman 276). Hollis uses these arguments as an excuse to sleep with other women, but he blames March even for this by claiming “she sent him into another woman’s arms” because their arguments “forced him to stray” (Hoffman 276). Instead of asserting herself as partners in a healthy relationship would do, according to Reeves, March uses sweet-talk to “flatter [Hollis] out of his rages” (Hoffman 225). Similarly, when Hollis isolates her from friends and family by threatening them and refusing to let her leave his property because “other men might look at her” (Hoffman 275), March, who views herself as indistinguishable from her misanthropist lover, “tells herself that she doesn’t miss a social life” (Hoffman 258). Her strong affiliation with Hollis also results in an emotional disengagement with her daughter. When Hollis attacks Gwen, March finds herself incapable of rushing to her daughter’s aid. Instead, she simply watches as “the man she loves [grabs her daughter by the] throat” (Hoffman 267). Likewise, when Hollis hits Gwen across the face with such force that it leaves “broken blood vessels beneath her skin” (Hoffman 270), March makes “excuses for [the man] she loves” (Hoffman 133). Not only does she fail to recognise that by hitting Gwen, Hollis is guilty of child abuse, but March’s sympathy is misplaced when instead of comforting her daughter and then taking the necessary steps to secure them both from harm, she rationalises his violence as illustrated by her observation that “when [Hollis] gets like this, he always regrets it [;][t]onight when she takes him to bed, he’ll cry [;][h]e’ll tell her that he never meant to hurt anyone, and she’ll believe him” (Hoffman 268).

*Here on Earth* underscores the role that nineteenth-century romantic ideology plays in providing a narrative that allow women to normalise abuse, and as Power et al., notes, “construct and interpret[it] as evidence of romantic love” (184). When first confronted with the rumours that Hollis had abused Belinda, perhaps even killed her by denying her the medical care necessary to



treat pneumonia, March does not see cause for concern. To March, Hollis's actions are justified because "he never loved Belinda [who] was a fool for marrying him" (Hoffman 224). March, who clings to novelistic notions of herself as the only woman capable of bringing out the best in Hollis, is convinced that he is "different with [her]" because she is the only woman who holds his heart "right in her hand" and that he would never harm her (Hoffman 144). Yet, when Hollis does hurt March in one of his jealous rages, twisting her wrist and then raping her, March tells herself that he did not mean any of it. Clinging to the belief pervasive in popular culture that violent possessiveness is proof that "Hollis loves her [;] [t]hats all[;][i]t is because he cares" (Hoffman 221), March rationalises the abuse that she suffers and, as Power et al., notes, "reconstruct[s] it so as to make it more palatable" (179). Like the many women who, as Power notes, "view jealousy and possessiveness as [a sign] of love" (181), March is ignorant to the fact that with her bruised wrists and "aggravating cough", she increasingly resembles the abused Belinda who also hid her bruised arms under long sleeves before she died (Hoffman 275). It is only when rapture is replaced by fear, and March, like Urquhart's Ann, comes crashing down from the fantasies inspired by romantic fiction, that she takes action. Hollis, who believes that "a woman who has her own money can leave you when you least expect it", has taken all the necessary steps to prevent March from being financially independent, and therefore under his control (Hoffman 235). However, March manages to escape Belinda's fate when, after a particularly bloody argument, she slips away in the dead of the night, using a plane ticket that Richard left her, to flee the toxic affair in which she finds herself.

In a review of *Here on Earth* for the *New York Times*, Karen Karbo questions the plausibility of Hoffman's tale, noting that at a time of "telephone, [...] talk shows, support groups and books about women who love too much [...] it is hard to believe that March could exist within such an emotional cocoon" (n.pag.). The pertinence of *Wuthering Heights*, Karbo states, is due to the insularity of Catherine and Heathcliff's social environment (n.pag.). Written before the 1853 Act for 'Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assault upon Women and Children', the characters in *Wuthering Heights*, Karbo claims, were "too mired in nineteenth century repression to benefit from the onslaught of twenty-century psychologising that has made 'dysfunctional' a household word" (n.pag.). I would argue, however, that *Here on Earth* in its depiction of abuse and imprisonment in the twentieth-century home, is revealing of the widespread yet deeply precarious nature of domestic violence in the post-Victorian western world, despite the progress

that has been made in the recognition of women's rights since the publication of Brontë's novel. Global estimates published by the World Health Organisation in 2017 indicate that about "one in three of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual Intimate Partner Violence [...] in their lifetime" and that "thirty-eight percent of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner" (n.pag). There is no means to compare these findings with Victorian statistics because, as Jenna Dodenhoff explains "by focussing attention on the harsh conditions of urban slums" nineteenth-century social scientists and novelists alike "perpetuated the popular image of middle-class [...] homes as havens of tranquillity, associating turmoil and abuse firmly with the lower classes" (1). This "perceived absence of domestic violence" among the British middle class was not as a result "idyllic living conditions but resulted from the increased privacy in the home during this period", Dodenhoff points out (1). Concealed behind domestic walls, the abused Victorian middle-class woman remained hidden from view. The same is true for many women in the twenty-first century who, despite an increased public awareness of domestic violence, are mistreated by their romantic partners, often with friends, neighbours and even family members being aware of the abuse but disinclined to interfere in what is rationalised as a 'private' matter. *Here on Earth* explores this conspiracy of silence that continues to enshroud Intimate Partner Violence. It is revealed that "everyone in town who had anything to do with Belinda kn[ew] the way [Hollis] treated her" (Hoffman 199). Yet, 'everybody', including Dr. Henderson, who treated Belinda's "broken mandible" along with the other "broken bones [and] bruises", failed to intervene (Hoffman 203). When asked for the first time about the circumstances surrounding Belinda's death, Dr. Henderson "seems relieved to be talking about th[e] subject", admitting that the "acute pneumonia" that is given as the cause of Belinda's demise, is "absolute bullshit", and that she died from "neglect" (Hoffman 203). There is little doubt that Hollis, as her husband, neglected his responsibility to love, cherish and take care of Belinda like he promised when he repeated the marriage vow 'in sickness and in health'. However, unlike the gossips of Jenkintown would like to believe, Hollis is not the only person "responsible for her death" (Hoffman 199); '[e]verybody in town', including a medical professional, knew that Belinda was being abused and yet they, too, neglected to come to Belinda's aid. March's suffering at the hands of Hollis is met by the same reluctance to get involved. During the holidays, the library committee, who class March in the "group of people in town [people] feel sorry for", leaves a basket of eggnog and fruitcake on her doorstep as an act

of kindness, yet nobody dares to interfere in March's private life (274). However, a question that needs consideration is whether March would have accepted any form of assistance. On the single occasion that her friend, Suzy, did express concern for her safety, March made "excuses" and told "lies", also to herself (Hoffman 133). Such behaviour is common among female victims of Intimate Partner Violence. Power observes that "compared with other forms of violence, [abused females] are less likely to report the violence to police, less likely to disclose, less likely to go to court, less likely to seek support and less likely to name the act as violent" (175). Often the reasons are "fear of retaliation", feeling of shame and, as *Here on Earth* illustrates, the continual "secrecy surrounding the issue" of domestic abuse (Power 175).

*Here on Earth* exposes the cultural constructs that make women enter into romantic partnerships with abusive men by illustrating the sexual allure that the Byronic stereotype continues to exert in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century. It is revealing that many of the women in Jenkintown besides March have "gone home with Hollis over the years", unable to "turn him down" despite knowing that he "isn't about to give them anything they want or need" (31). Rich, powerful and attractive, but also seemingly vulnerable because "[h]e's been hurt" (Hoffman 31), Hollis represents the quintessential tortured hero that is synonymous with the nineteenth-century British poet Lord Byron; a figure, as Bog and Ray observe, that "remains plentiful in popular culture [where it] appears strongly to resonate with youthful audiences" (357). As noted earlier, many popular romances, including *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades*, depict the physically aggressive, possessive male protagonist as the masculine ideal. *Here on Earth*, in contrast, strips Hollis of "all the dark Romanticism", to quote Hila Shachar (71). From the outset it is established that Hollis, who in March's own words is "cruel" and "nasty tempered", is "bad news" (Hoffman 12). His tendency to "blame others for what is wrong with his life" (Hoffman 72) is a common character trait among abusive personalities, according to Katreena Scott and Murray Straus's study on intimate aggression and dating partners (851). Like Heathcliff, Hollis is a product of his social environment; his need to be in control at all times is the direct result of the abuse he suffered as a child. In *Wuthering Height*, we are mostly kept in the dark about Heathcliff's life before being adopted by Mr. Earnshaw. In *Here on Earth*, more is revealed about Hollis's past, mostly in the form of some "ugly rumours" that "Hollis had murdered someone", that his mother was a "prostitute who'd been murdered herself" and that "Hollis was most definitely a thief" (Hoffman 19). His unhappy formative years, together with the marginalisation he continues to

experience by the men of Jenkintown who tolerate him only because he is the richest man in town but calls him “Mr. Death [...] when his back is turned” (31), have made Hollis, much like John Thornton in *North and South*, distrustful of other people (Hoffman 287). Even in his relationship with March, he feels at her mercy because “his own love for her makes him feel like a beggar” (Hoffman 245). Hoffman is not unsympathetic in its depiction of Hollis. In the portrayal of Hollis rescuing his nephew Hank from the squalor in which he lived with his alcoholic father, providing him food, access to education and home, Hoffman redeems him from villain status. However, like Patricia Park, she refrains from romantic love serving as a magic formula that miraculously transforms a man with complex psychological issues into the ideal romantic partner. Instead, by allowing the Byronic stereotype to die in a car crash, without any promise of a romantic reunion in the afterlife, Hoffman delivers her own “powerful blight” on popular culture’s employment of Victorian novelistic convention that normalises Intimate Partner Abuse in its elevation of the physically aggressive, possessive hero as the peak of romantic reference (Pike 349).

Geoffrey Urbaniak and Peter H. Killman’s study on physical attraction explores the common perception, both in general consciousness and in the mass media, that in terms of romantic relationships, “‘nice guys’ finish last” (413). Urbaniak and Killman note that, according to this belief, women are perceived to “display contradicting attitudes and behaviour toward those whom they choose as dating partners” (413). It is observed that “although women often portray themselves as wanting to date kind, sensitive, and emotionally expressive men, the nice guy stereotype contends that, when actually presented with a choice between such a ‘nice guy’ and an unkind, insensitive, emotionally closed ‘macho man’ or ‘jerk’, they invariably reject the nice guy in favour of his more macho competitor” (413). Like Urbaniak and Killman’s study, *Here on Earth* challenges the ‘nice guy’ stereotype in its juxtaposition of Hollis with Richard, who as a modern interpretation of Edgar Linton serves as a foil for the Byronic hero. Unlike Brontë’s novel where Edgar, who shies away from violent confrontation, is depicted as a weak character whose failure to stand up against Heathcliff leads to the loss of everything he hold dear, Hoffman underscores kindness and restraint as desirable traits in a romantic partner, with Richard being granted a more positive outcome than his Victorian equivalent, who dies an early death. Similar to Edgar Linton, Richard Cooper is a loving husband and devoted father who refrains from violent conduct. When Richard becomes suspicious that his wife is having an affair with “a man

he happens to despise and holds responsible for his sister's death", Richard returns to Jenkintown with two extra plane tickets in his pocket, "hoping against hope" (Hoffman 226) that March and Gwen will return home with him (Hoffman 180). Two decades before, Richard, who is described as a benevolent, "slightly dazed person to whom charity came naturally" took it upon himself to comfort March when her childhood lover left, "bringing candy and books, as if getting over Hollis was not unlike recuperating from some horrible illness" (Hoffman 54). After Richard's father disinherited him due to a bitter argument they had "concerning Mr. Cooper's interest in a logging company that was destroying a species of wood spider so tiny it was invisible to the naked eye" (Hoffman 56) – an altruistic act of environmental preservation that contrasts sharply to Hollis's compulsive need to enrich himself mainly by means of property development – he moved to California where March, after "a lifetime up in her bedroom, waiting for Hollis" (Hoffman 28) joined him. Now that March is back in Jenkintown, Richard is not fooled by the lies that March tells during their hasty telephone conversations. He is aware how his wife of nearly two decades feels about Hollis. Even so, he "travel[s] three thousand miles" to ask March to come back despite expecting to be "turned away" (Hoffman 180). When March affair with Hollis is exposed, and she finally confess to Richard "that she'll be staying on and that she never meant to hurt him" there is none of the violence that characterises March and Hollis's relationship (Hoffman 187). Richard does not go into a fit of anger, like Hollis, who in a moment of rage slams his fists through a window. The same non-violent stance characterises Richard's conduct when he comes face to face with Hollis. Unlike *Wuthering Heights*, where the meeting between the romantic rivals ends violently with Edgar, in a singular act of bravery, punching Heathcliff in the gullet before running away, and Heathcliff vowing to "crush [Edgar's] ribs like a rotten hazel nut" (Brontë 143), Richard does not enter into a brawl with Hollis. Nor does he "step on the gas [of his car] and careen through the fence to run [Hollis] down" (Hoffman 188) when he sees Hollis outside the Cooper family estate that Richard was meant to inherit, but which fell instead in Hollis's hands when Belinda died. Rather, Richard "watches as some Canada geese pass by overhead" before he drives away overcome, not by anger, but by "immense sadness" that March would allow herself to be manipulated by someone like Hollis (Hoffman 188).

Richard's calm demeanour diverge from what Drew Philips describes as the "energy and decisiveness, even [the] ruthlessness" that contemporary readership admired in Heathcliff (127).

It would, however, be a mistake to confuse Richard's self-control for the same cowardice that Edgar Linton represents. One of the key qualities of Richard that distinguishes him from other characters in the book is that he does not allow strong emotions to dictate his behaviour. Another man might have "carr[ie]d [March] off, [made] demands, beat her until she gave in to him" (Hoffman 188) but never having been one to tell March "what to do" (Hoffman 114), Richard does not assume to do so now. Unlike Hollis, who claims full ownership of March, to such an extent that he does not allow her out of the house for fear that "other men might look at her" (Hoffman 275), Richard does not view March as a possession. It is for this reason that he does not enter into a physical confrontation with Hollis, because he knows that March is not something he can fight for and win. If March is ever to return, it would have to be of her own accord; therefore Richard takes a more pro-active approach than violence, by "leav[ing] a cheque on the kitchen counter because he worries that his wife will run out of cash" (Hoffman 188) before he returns to California, where he continues to check on March and Gwen. When he is no longer able to make telephonic contact with his wife and daughter, because Hollis cut the telephone line, Richard proceed to send two plane ticket to a family friend's address for safekeeping, should March and Gwen ever feel the need to return home. It is the same ticket that March uses when she finally makes a run for her life. Hollis, in an attempt to stop March from taking the flight, dies in what could either be an accident or, as Hank suspects, suicide. Richard, in contrast, lives on with his daughter in California subverting the notion that 'nice guys finish last'. The reversal of Brontë original plot structure in which Edgar dies, leaving Cathy orphaned and vulnerable to Heathcliff's abuse, may perhaps be interpreted as Hoffman's attempt to endorse a kindness and compassion as opposed to violent dominance as more desirable masculine qualities.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy and Hareton's romantic union "offsets, perhaps even redeems", the destruction wrought by [Heathcliff and Catherine]", as Julie Jones observes (152). In *Here on Earth*, first cousins Gwen and Hank's relationship serves a similar function. Like their Victorian equivalents, Gwen and Hank's romantic relationship, which is forged under conditions of abuse and neglect, is characterised by rationality and mutual respect that provide an alternative to the obsessive, all-consuming passion of their parental figures. However, Hoffman does away with the romantic ending that characterises Brontë's novel. Distinct from Cathy and Hareton, the twentieth-century pair does not live on in marital perpetuity. Instead, Hoffman's novel ends with



Gwen and Hank parted, she living with her father in California and he embarking on a future of his own after inheriting Hollis's fortune. Unlike *On Chesil Beach*, Gwen and Hank's failed relationship is not portrayed as tragic. Rather, Gwen and Hank's decision to be apart is rooted in a mutual awareness of each other's individuality and need for freedom, a trait that constitutes a "healthy" relationship, according to Reeve (16). Oppose to the possessive co-dependence that exists between March and Hollis, as expressed in her statement that "[f]rom now on, he is mine" (Hoffman 17), both Gwen and Hank are respectful of the fact that they do not "own" one another (Hoffman 277). Hoffman underscores a more sensible approach to matters of the heart, when, subsequent to Hollis's violent attacks on Gwen, she leaves Hank in Jenkintown to return to the safety of her father's house. Access to Gwen's private thoughts reveals that this is "not because she doesn't love him [but] because she knows he can take care of himself" (Hoffman 216), while she, as the daughter of Hollis's romantic rival, is a target of Hollis's violence. In *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy Linton has no choice but to remain in the home of her oppressor and endure Heathcliff's abuse, because she would be destitute if ever she decided to leave. Gwen has the option to return to her childhood home, and wisely does so. Hank, who has suspected for a while that Gwen plans to return to California but that she postponed doing so because she "has the strongest sense that she need to keep [Tarot, Belinda's old ranging horse] safe", does not prevent Gwen from fleeing Jenkintown, even though he knows that her departure would mean the end of their relationship (Hoffman 215). Gwen's safety and wellbeing is Hank's primary concern, therefore he assists her in escaping by promising to take care of Tarot until she can make the necessary arrangements to transport her beloved horse to California. Hank's selfless love, in which he places Gwen's needs before his own, is antithetical to Hollis's narcissistic possessiveness. It can therefore be argued that, like Richard, Hank represents an alternative to the sexually dominant masculine ideal that most *Wuthering Heights* rewritings tend to idealise.

Gwen, similar to Hank, subverts nineteenth-century novelistic gender ideals when she refuses to conform to the passive feminine stereotype that, as Perkin observes, "exist[s] for the sake of love, [her] destin[y] handed over to the hero of the story" (117). Gwen is careful not to become like March, who, up until the point she decides to leave Hollis, calls to mind the submissive heroine that the Victorian novel idealises. As previously noted, Hoffman, like Brontë, rejects the notion that women, with love alone, can transform villainous men. Instead, in her co-dependent state with Hollis, March comes to resemble Isabella Heathcliff who shortly after marrying



Heathcliff is described by Nelly as “wan and listless” (Brontë 181). Gwen decision to seek “the opposite of what her mother has” brings positive change in her own life (Hoffman 215). Unlike March, who physically deteriorates, Gwen overall sense of well-being improves significantly over the course of the novel. When readers are first introduced to Gwen, she is described as a “ghoulish” teenager who experiments with sex and drugs (Hoffman 49). After being caught shoplifting, it is decided that she cannot be left on her own and is therefore forced to return with her mother to Jenkintown to attend the funeral of Judith Dale. Yet, while in Jenkintown, Gwen develops from “the most sedentary creature on earth” who typically “sleeps until noon, or one, when she’d rise only to throw herself in an easy chair to complain, grouse, whine, and threatens, all the while eating cookies and frozen pizza” into a healthy and responsible young woman (94-95). The romantic attachment that she forms with Hank has little to do with Gwen’s transformation. Like Patricia Park’s *Re Jane*, Hoffman’s novel steers away from a narrative structure in which the female protagonists’ growth is inextricably linked to her romantic partner. Instead, it is Gwen’s connection with Tarot, who like herself has suffered abuse at the hands of Hollis, which allows for the “major turn” that occurs in her life (Hoffman 83). Like Gwen, Tarot has “always been wild” (Hoffman 94). After having been beaten with a chain by Hollis, the once successful racing horse becomes uncontrollable, killing two riders before he is taken off the track (Hoffman 33). Belinda, whilst still alive, was the only person who could ride Tarot thereafter. After Belinda’s passing, however, Hollis kept Tarot despite hating the “sound and smell of horses”, not as a “mark of respect for Belinda” as many of the women in Jenkintown like to think, but access to Hollis’s private thoughts reveal that he took sadistic pleasure in the notion that the horse was a “waste”, just like himself (Hoffman 33). Hollis admires Tarot’s brutality, which resembles his own. Although the beast and man despise each other, Hollis observes that “all in all, you don’t take the only creature mean enough to be your equal out behind the barn so that you can shoot him in the head” (Hoffman 35). Hollis also identifies with Tarot as a social outcast when, like himself, the people of Jenkintown refuse to come near the horse. To them, Tarot is an evil creature, shrouded in small town gossip; Mimi Frank, the local hairdresser, “insists that Tarot breathed out fire when [in an attempt to escape] he ran through town” (Hoffman 34). Yet Gwen, who knows “nothing about horses”, instantly bonds with Tarot, their first encounter being described as “something so rare as planets leaving their orbit to crash into each other and fill up the night” (Hoffman 82 - 83). It is her deep connection with Tarot that

motivates her to get up early each day and take care of the horse. Gwen's love for Tarot does not come without sacrifices. When Hollis becomes aware of the bond that exists between Gwen and his horse, he uses Tarot as a bargaining tool to get March and Gwen to move in with him. This gives Hollis power over Gwen. When she defies Hollis, he threatens to shoot Tarot despite the promise he made to Gwen that she would become the legal owner of the horse if she consents to the live in his house. However, with the help of Hank, Gwen manages to secure a safe future for herself and her beloved racing horse. The promise of Gwen and Tarot being reunited in California is the nearest that Hoffman comes to providing her heroine with a happy ending.

*Here on Earth*, which opens with Judith Dale funeral and concludes with Hollis's burial, contrasts sharply with the romantic endings of the Victorian marriage plot, and its many appropriations in popular culture. While Hoffman does allow for the brooding atmosphere that contemporary readership has come to cherish in adaptations of Brontë's novel, she deviates from the typical appropriation of *Wuthering Heights* as a "transcendent love story with a pair of archetypal lovers" to quote Shachar (9). Not only are March and Hollis denied the romantic ever-after(life) that Brontë allows Heathcliff and Catherine, but the open-ended conclusion in *Here on Earth*, typical of postmodern fiction, discloses nothing about a romantic reconciliation between March and Richard after her returns to California, nor is it revealed what Hank and Gwen's future holds. In doing so Hoffman subverts a tradition of women's literature whose happy denouements present readers with a fictional ideal that is far from the lived experience of married life (Harrison 118). By de-familiarising and disrupting novelistic convention, Hoffman exposes the role that popular romance continues to play in "normalis[ing] abusive within the context of a romantic relationship" (Benomi et al, 168). Violence against women remains a widespread, albeit often hidden reality for many women, as is illustrated by for example the #MeToo Movement, founded in 2017, which allows women a social platform to voice the abuse they suffer. *Here on Earth*, with its revisionary approach to *Wuthering Heights*, foregrounds the patriarchal novelistic ideology that as Boone observes "allows men access to power through their control of women" (165). Although not historical in its setting, *Here on Earth* critical engagement with the Victorian past that exposes the nineteenth century notion of romantic love as an agent of transformation to be a dangerous assumption aligns itself with neo-Victorianism. Like *On Chesil Beach* and *Re Jane*, *Here on Earth* exploration of pervasive Victorian marital ideology extend beyond what Catereena Novak describes as neo-Victorianism "stock themes and

motives” thereby contributing to ongoing development of neo-Victorian as a postmodern literary genre (114).

## CONCLUSION

Historically, the novel has played an important part in endorsing companionate marriage as the romantic ideal and continues to do so today. During the nineteenth century, the traditional Victorian novel employed wedlock as a reward for feminine conduct that conformed to patriarchal norms and values. By implying that the virtuous middle-class female held the power to transform morally corrupted men and that her so-assumed biologically pre-determined role of wife, mother and moral guide was indispensable to the welfare of England as an economic power, the novel effaced the “economic, legal and social reality of marriage in favour of a romantic ideal [...] produced through fiction” (Harrison 115). It is partly because of the Victorian novel’s romanticised portrayals of wedlock as woman’s primary source of joy and fulfilment that women in contemporary western societies, as Harrison observes, “think about marriage the way [they] do”; the happy marriages that concludes the virtuous heroine’s paths towards self-becoming “provide models for marriages [women] still desire” (113). By relying on a romantic plot structure that has remained relatively unchanged, much of popular romance is responsible for the inadvertent perpetuation of the patriarchal ideals intrinsic to the traditional Victorian novel. Like its Victorian antecedent, the romantic denouements of contemporary female fiction upholds the nineteenth-century novelistic notion of marriage as a natural and essential part of womanhood which continues to pressurise women to marry, even though the considerable progress that has been made in women’s social position since the 1960s presents the contemporary woman with numerous other alternatives for the achievement of self-actualisation.

The neo-Victorian novel, as a continuation of the nineteenth-century counter-traditional novel, subverts the patriarchal ideology of traditional Victorian fiction. By foregrounding the voices of sexually marginalised figures that the Victorian cautionary tale condemned, pioneering neo-Victorian novels in particular provided an alternative female identity that personifies the ideals upheld by the 1960s Sexual Liberation Movement. However, the “overtly political use of the sex trope in neo-Victorian fiction”, as Kohlke observes, has proved to be problematic, particularly at a time where social media is taking a more deliberate stance against the sexual harassment and

sexual abuse that for many women is a daily reality (353). *On Chesil Beach*, *Re Jane* and *Here on Earth*, whose critical engagement with the Victorian past aligns them with neo-Victorianism, steer away from plot structures in which female self-actualisation is contingent on a (hetero)sexual relationship. By drawing attention to the manner in which patriarchal notions are replicated in contemporary fiction and its seemingly subversive depiction of transgressive sex, these novels, as is typical of neo-Victorian fiction, explore what Llewellyn describes as the “impact of the nineteenth century and its enduring legacy in the present” (169).

*On Chesil Beach* is significant for the way in which it exposes how Victorian convention continues to influence the lives of people after the Victorian era ended. By following the wedding night of the newlywed Edward and Florence, McEwan’s novel emphasises Victorian notions of propriety that make it difficult for the characters to achieve emotional and physical intimacy. Typically, the traditional Victorian novel employed romantic love as a unifying force; any obstacles that the young couple might have faced prior to their romantic union are instantly resolved through wedlock. Harrison explains that because the events that follow marriage are seldom documented “the fictional ideal of marriage is defined by happiness, not hard work, by constancy, not change”, the novel instilling in readers unrealistic expectations of wedlock (119). McEwan illustrates this point in his depiction of the sexually incompatible Edward and Florence, whose individual choice of reading material has left them ill prepared for their new roles as husband and wife. By following a counter-traditional plot structure that goes beyond the typical romantic denouement, it is revealed how the couple’s newly married state, in laying bare their social and sexual differences, cause conflict and misunderstanding rather than resolving it. The notion of wedlock as a unifying force as suggested in Arnold’s “Dover Beach” is subverted when marriage fails in bridging their sexual problems. The novel ends tragically when Edward and Florence part ways because they are unable to voice their sexual needs to each other.

In *On Chesil Beach*, like in *Re Jane*, the female protagonist achieves fulfilment outside the strictures of wedlock. After the disintegration of the short-lived Mayhew marriage, Florence is able to pursue her musical career because she does not have the responsibilities of caring for a husband or children. Yet, her success as a violinist is overshadowed by the tragedy of a failed marriage that could easily have been prevented if not for the remnants of Victorian convention that made open conversations about sex between husbands and wives difficult. In *Re Jane*,

however, the termination of an unsatisfactory relationship is celebrated as a triumph. Partaking in the neo-Victorian practice of revisioning and rewriting classic Victorian narratives, Park appropriates a canonical Victorian text, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, only to subvert the traditional plot structure in which the heroine's growth "corresponds with her path towards wedlock" (117). Jane Re, who serves as a Korean-American version of Jane Eyre, does not live happily ever after with Ed, the Rochester figure. Nor does she manage to transform his disagreeable temperament. Rather, as a modern retelling of *Jane Eyre*, Park's novel emphasises the importance of non-sexual relationships and friendships, particularly between women, as an alternative to female bildung that leads to marriage. Typically, women in traditional Victorian fiction had to compete with others for the achievement of marriage with the partner of their choice, thus situating women as always in a position of rivalry with one another. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, Rochester's first wife Bertha is depicted as a monstrous figure that stands in the way of Jane's happiness and fulfilment. When she dies, Jane is finally able to conclude her path to self-becoming in marriage, as is the custom in the traditional female bildungsroman. Park refrains from sacrificing one woman's life for the happiness of another. Instead, the developing relationship between Beth, Ed's wife, and Jane Re conclude in a supportive friendship between the two women that forms the central plot line.

The demystification of the Byronic hero that occurs in *Re Jane* also features in *Here on Earth* as Hoffman sets out to expose Victorian ideologies of marriage, which, as Emily Brontë shows in *Wuthering Heights*, left Victorian women naive and exposed to abuse. Contrary to the romanticisation of violence, aggression and obsessive love that contemporary adaptations of Brontë's novel tend to portray as signifiers of masculine romantic devotion, Hoffman exposes the transformative power of love, upheld by many traditional novels, as a dangerous supposition. In Hoffman's retelling of *Wuthering Heights*, it is March who is left (negatively) altered and not Hollis, the Heathcliff figure. Blinded by her belief in Victorian romantic ideology, March fails to recognise that she and her daughter are being victimised by a man she misconstrues as a hero of romance. March's co-dependence on Hollis leads to a loss of autonomy, which places Hollis in a position of power over her. Hoffman does not romanticise such unbalanced power relations. Rather, opposed to dominant masculinity, kindness is underscored as a desirable trait in Hoffman's depiction of Richard Cooper, March's husband, who saves her life when he leaves a

plane ticket at family friends to enable her return home. The notion of selfless love as the romantic ideal is repeated when Hank helps his cousin Gwen, March's daughter, to escape from Jenkintown when he promises to take care of Tarot, Gwen's beloved horse. Hoffman refrains from a plot structure in which the heroine achieves "self-liberation through sexual liberation" (359) when the teenage Gwen's newfound passion for horse-riding leads her on a path of self-discovery.

By shifting the focus away from the celebration of transgressive Victorian sexuality typical of neo-Victorianism to a critical revisioning of middle-class Victorian companionate marriage as an ideal inscribed in the marriage plot which remains prevalent in contemporary fiction and lives, *On Chesil Beach*, *Re Jane* and *Here on Earth* allow for a widening of what is typically understood as neo-Victorian fiction. Although these novels are not historical in their setting, they nevertheless engage in the neo-Victorian practise of engaging critically with the Victorians in a way that opens up a dialogue between the past and the present. The novels discussed in this thesis thus make a valuable contribution to the field on neo-Victorianism by revealing how the Victorian marriage plot continues to "script convention and canonical plot lines in modern life", as Harrison points out (129). By tracing the afterlife of the Victorian marriage plot in these novels set entirely in either the twentieth- or twenty-first century, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate that they warrant a necessary revaluation of the parameters of neo-Victorian studies.

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